

ARTISTS & WRITERS WORKSHOP, INC.

A NON-PROFIT EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION

(213) 550-6857

"LOW-BUDGET FILMMAKING"

A one day seminar.

June 2, 1984.
Hyatt on Sunset.
West Hollywood, California.

SEMINAR SCHEDULE

MORNING

A. PANEL #1: 09:15-10:30 "Financing"

Moderator: David Schmoeller....."Seduction" and "Tourist Trap"

1. Kathryn Galan.....Exec. Prod.-Atlantic Distribution
2. Barbara Javitts.....Direc. Media Home Entertainment
3. Scott Rosenfelt.....Producer "Roadhouse"
4. Larry Mortoff.....Producer

B. PANEL #2: 10:45-12:00 "Productions, Unions, Deferrment"

Moderator: Martha Coolidge....."Valley Girl","Joy of Sex"

1. John Dorr.....Direc. EZTV Video Gallery
2. Kat Krone....."SAG" Contract Rep.
3. Michael Callan.....Producer "Double Exposure"
4. Jay Coggan.....Producer "Double Exposure"

*****LUNCHBREAK*****

AFTERNOON

C. PANEL #3: 1:30-2:45 "Production"

Moderator: Robert Mundy.....Writer "Chattanooga Choo-Choo"

1. Mary Woronov.....Star "Eating Raoul"
2. Hercules Bellville.....Producer "Strangers Kiss"
3. Penelope Spheeris.....Director "Suburbia"
4. Peter McCarthy.....Producer "Repo Man"

D. PANEL #4: 3:00-4:15 "Distribution"

Moderator: Sam Oldham.....Assoc. Direc. Sherwood Oaks Coll.

1. Robert O'Neal.....Writer/Director "Angel"
2. John Quinn.....Distributor, New Image Films
3. Paul Leader.....Producer, "Sketches of a Strangler"
4. Mark Rosman.....Writer/Prod."House on Sorority Row"

E. Cocktail Hour: 4:30-6:00.

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Los Angeles Reader



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Journals

Ghettos: black and white and gay in color.

SAYLES IN HARLEM

6 p.m. "Hey. What's the movie called?" Clutching his plastic cup, the guy warily thrusts out his chin. Night is falling on 148th St. in Harlem, as the raffish film crew sets up on an abandoned lot. An aimless crowd of kids on bikes, couples on a stroll, and seasoned drunks gathers. Some people are setting up chairs, and those little plastic cups circulate. The young white woman juggling camera lenses says, "*The Brother Who Fell to Earth*. Or maybe we'll call it *The Brother from Another Planet*."

Suddenly the man straightens up. "Brother, huh? Good title. What's it about?"

"A slave from outer space who falls to earth in Harlem."

"Man, he come to the right place. This here is the center of the world. Hey, it is out of this world."

John Sayles is making a science fiction movie about a place that might as well be outer space to most of us—the streets of Harlem. He's making it with \$200,000 of his own money, hoarded from scripting work on Hollywood features and from the cushion provided by a MacArthur Foundation grant. The film draws from his double-track movie-making background of exploitation and mainstream Hollywood work, as well as his *Return of the Secaucus Seven* and *Lianna*.

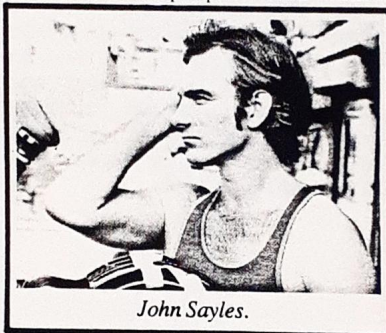
Brother is science fiction with a twist: this time, the alien comes home. An intergalactic slave escapes via an otherworldly underground railroad, which—shades of slavery days—ends in Harlem. He is pursued by bounty hunters (one of them played by Sayles himself) but rescued with the help of the people of Harlem. Befriended by barflies, mugged by junkies, tended by social workers, and first fussed over and then thrown out by his AFDC-mother landlady, the alien (played by Joe Morton, seen recently in a lead role in PBS' *The File on Jill Hatch* and in a small role in *And Justice for All*) encounters racial

discrimination and poverty. What's odd about him is not how otherworldly or impressively naive he is but how well he fits into the scene; everyone reads his silence and befuddlement differently.

6:30 p.m. "Can I be inna picture? Who do I ask? Lemme be an extra, I'll do it for \$10."

"No, no me, I'll do it for \$5."

Sayles wanted to make a movie with guts that black people would watch.



John Sayles.

"We knew we had to make it with the people of Harlem," he says, "and we knew we wanted to work with a largely black crew. The only hard part so far has been that everybody wants to work on it, and you wish you could employ them all."

Particularly for a low-budget production, befriending the locals is crucial for visitors from that other planet below 110th St. "We need to have them want us here," location manager Paul Marcus says. "We're on their turf. But I think it makes a difference what we're doing; people like the project." This is a first-time experience for nearly everybody—making a movie in Harlem. Hell, *being* in Harlem.

The crew is a mixture—black and white, experienced and novice, women and men. For many of the blacks this is a big break; for veterans this may be the first time they've not been the *only* black on a crew. The interracial mixture turns out to be surprisingly unimportant. "I think the male-female divisions are more defining," says Fronza Woods, working the boom. She came to the project after making several shorts with the Women's Interart Center. "Just like

on any shoot, the men talk to the men, and that's a habit that's hard to break."

"It's been no different for me to work with a black crew," Marcus says. "People who love this industry have some basic similarities. They are sophisticated and professional—the movie comes first." On this shoot people sit around and talk for an hour after they knock off for the day.

8 p.m. The tidy middle-aged lady wearing a cross nods. "*Brother*—hmm, that's good, that's good. I came on over here, see, because nobody who looks like you ever comes up here unless they're gonna tear something down. But bless you with your picture. Bless you. I won't be trouble. I'll stay out of your way now. Bless you."

"I think coming up here opened the eyes of some whites," says script supervisor Marco Williams, who works with the Black Filmmakers Foundation. "It sure did," says Bob Marshak, who's usually a potter in Santa Cruz, Calif., but is here taking photos. "You come here with a certain amount of fear—it's outside your experience. But it's much more neighborhoody than I realized."

The first day they shot in Harlem, the crew got a quick education in Harlem street life. They had locked the keys inside their van; a passerby helped them break into it, thus salvaging the production schedule. But the man had put down his travel bag to jimmy the window, and in seconds the bag—with his methadone—had been stolen. Producer Maggie Renzi spent the rest of the day filing a police report so that the street samaritan wouldn't be stranded in need.

If the white crew members had never walked the streets of Harlem, neither had a lot of the blacks. "I had a thousand misconceptions when I started," says production assistant Kurt Douglas, fresh from film school downtown. His job is mostly talking to people; "crowd control" means something special on this shoot. He admits he secretly hoped he'd get sick to escape this all-night shoot on Harlem's abandoned lots. But it's going well, and he says "it's been fun."

Even for crew members who know Harlem well, fears die hard. "I grew up on 125th St., and I moved back to Harlem as an adult," costume designer Karen Perry says. "My daughter goes to school down the street. But my mother always told me, 'Don't go uptown—too rough.' When she found out I was working at night on 148th St.—well, my brother has been to the set four times now, just to make sure I'm OK."

9 p.m. A couple of middle-aged men amble up, craning to watch Brother discover his mugger dead of an overdose. Perry is about to give one of the men a perfunctory nod when she does a double-take: "Sam, how are you?" she says. They swap stories of showbiz unemployment; they are not just neighbors but colleagues from the days a decade ago when things looked more promising for black actors.

Filmed scenes keep echoing scenes on the street. Fantasies of escape, for instance. In a bar, actors speculate about life in outer space while toying with a *Space Invaders* game. Around the set, locals easily launch into talk of Venus, astrology, and UFOs. In the movie a small thing like choosing a restaurant can become a political act; one character refuses to go below 110th St., even for Chinese food. Harlem dwellers keep asserting their sense of place: people treat the film crew at first like tourists to be fleeced and then like foreign dignitaries.

10 p.m. Someone gingerly approaches a white crew member. "Thank you," he says. "Thank you for visiting Harlem."

Turf isn't just to be defended, however; it's also something to take pride in and even show off. As much as their pride of ownership, they register an intense will to communicate—on their terms. They like the idea of a movie made not only in their world but about it, and they like the idea of a black man starring in it. Harlem wants to go Hollywood, but not if it means leaving Harlem behind. They flock around Joe Morton whenever he finishes a shot.

11 p.m. "Where's the monster? That him?"

Everyone wants a glimpse of a movie star, and the people of Harlem are no different. Morton is something of a sensation. They recognize him not so much from his movie work as from the soaps and especially from an educational TV show called *Watch Your Mouth*. He is happy to be there, both for them and for him. "It's almost impossible to find roles

in the movies for a black actor," he says. "And most science fiction is like what Richard Pryor said about 2001—they must think there won't be any blacks by then."

"This role is great because I don't speak, and it brings out everybody's expectations when they imagine who I am and what I want. The role makes the audience look at Harlem from both white and black perspectives. It's Harlem seen not as a jungle but from the eyes of innocence. And people get so excited when they hear the story—it'll finally be a movie where they'll get to see themselves on the screen."

1 a.m. It's lunch break on the all-night shift. We straggle back to the community center that is HQ for *Brother*, dully staring at posters about blood pressure and good nutrition. A bag lady and a bum are hanging out at the desks—odd, because the HQ is off-limits to anyone but crew. But as they line up for beef stew, they begin to trade advice on agents and contracts. They're actors who've just finished getting into costume, waiting for their scene to come up.

PAT AUFDERHEIDE

FEATURE FILMMAKING AT USED CAR PRICES

"I read recently that Americans are buying used cars for an average of \$4,300 and I thought, why don't they take the bus to work and make a feature film instead?" (Rick Schmidt)

A 90 minute color/sound feature will be written, directed, filmed, edited

by _____
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Rick Schmidt (Dir./Producer of *A MAN, A WOMAN, AND A KILLER*, 1988; *THE REMAKE*, and *EMERALD CITIES*) will produce a feature film in a production workshop at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, May-August 1988.

Fifteen students will each collaborate on a screenplay (first session), direct and film the script (second session), edit and complete a feature film for 9 units college credit (third session) and own the film in equal percent with the other class members. Students will be selected only for all three sessions, and this production workshop will be limited to the first 15 to register.



Attn:

FEATURE FILM PRODUCTION WORKSHOP

There are very few people that come anywhere close to Jean-Luc Godard's breakdown techniques (including a very rich decoupage) but at moments *EMERALD CITIES* makes you wish Hollywood had been the one without the bucks and that filmmaking was an affectionate tank being driven into the heart of America.

Wade Novy

Rick Schmidt features (*A Man, A Woman, And A Killer*, 1988; *The Remake*, and *Emerald Cities*) now available in VHS/BETA video cassettes.

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TEN CHEAP MOVIES AND HOW THEY GOT THAT WAY

Independents have learned to do more for less, bringing in a feature film for what Hollywood spends on coffee breaks. Here's a look at the tricks of the trade.

Kathleen Hulser

Making movies is an art, but it's also an expensive addiction. Never happy unless filming, their every project a risk, independents exhibit all the addict's symptoms: insomnia, irritability, loss of appetite, and lack of patience over any topic not related to the great gamble. Some directors would hock everything—from house to soul—in order to keep an underbankrolled

baby toddling toward paradise (that is, the first answer print).

Why do filmmakers do it? Independents frequently cite three reasons for enduring the agonies of low budgets. One, creative freedom, most say, diminishes as the budget (and number of compromises) increases. Two, certain story ideas and styles simply wouldn't be thinkable in investor-oriented Hollywood, where the average film budget is \$11 million. Imagine Yvonne Rainer trying to explain why her

film consists of a fiftyish woman monologuing to her psychoanalyst in a cavernous room, and you begin to understand. Then there is the thorny issue of outsiders: Hollywood has never embraced women, blacks, Latinos, Asian-Americans, political dissidents, or experimentalists, so these people tend to shape their stories in low-budget limbo.

Dziga Vertov did it, Maya Deren did it, later filmmakers from Andy Warhol to John Waters did it—and all proved that



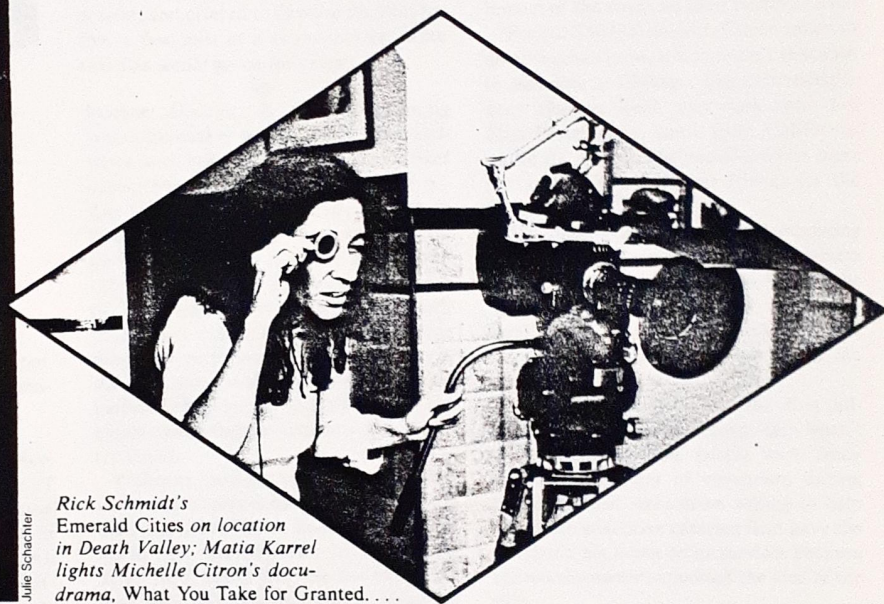
whose "aesthetic and images fit within the possible."

For his 1983 *Slow Moves*, a ninety-minute, 16mm, color romance made in San Francisco for \$8,000, he, as usual, operated the camera himself. And he kept his shooting ratio down to his customary 2.5 to 1—remarkable considering that this film was improvised and the actors, working without a script, actually met when the cameras rolled for the first time.

Jost shoots on reversal, the high-speed news cameraman's film stock; it has a hard emulsion, so he can edit on the positive image of his original and spare himself the cost of work prints. As for sound, the canny filmmaker relies on a professional-model Sony Walkman. Since Jost usually works with dialogue, and perhaps some background noise and music, he never lays more than two tracks, thus avoiding lengthy, budget-bashing sessions in the mixing studio. And as for the quality he gets, Jost

springs from a single eye. By doing almost everything himself—script, camera, sound, sets, and editing—he ensures that his films have a unique personal vision. His 1981 *Him and Me* (color, 16mm, eighty-eight minutes), made for \$13,000, was inspired by his diaries and his dreams. In it he portrays Manhattan as a horizontal city, the way a midwesterner like himself would see it. The interiors couldn't be anything but personal, because he filmed in his own loft with his own furniture, even re-upholstering his couch for one scene. Benning housed his lead actress from Paris during the shoot, and even designed and sewed a dress for the film—his first foray in the world of couture.

The most remote location called for in *Him and Me* was a merry-go-round in Coney Island, where the filmmaker found a particularly agreeable steed that reappears several times in the film. As for his biggest postproduction cost, the sound mix-



Rick Schmidt's Emerald Cities on location in Death Valley; Matia Karrel lights Michelle Citron's docudrama, *What You Take for Granted*...

high production values aren't the only way to go. But *how* did they do it? Here are the answers given by ten people who managed to bring in some of the cheapest independent fiction features of the last five years.

For nearly two decades, Jon Jost has directed the sort of handmade films that define the cut-rate independent genre. Philosophically and practically he's committed to working cheaply. He describes his approach as that of a self-taught artist

points out that Godard used only two tracks in *Every Man for Himself* and no one complained.

Jost currently lives in Europe, where most of his film sales occur. At age forty he has never received a production grant for a film, nor made a sale to American television. Reflecting on his chronic lack of cash, Jost says, "If things are tight, the lesson is to learn to do it cheaper."

James Benning believes that an artist's film

ing, Benning traded his services as an artist-in-residence to a university for the use of its sound studio.

Life offers some hard choices to director Rick Schmidt: "You can own a great car—or you can take the bus to work and make movies." Although it represented the ultimate sacrifice to this son of California, Schmidt sold his 1939 Dodge to make a ninety-minute, 16mm, color feature, *Emerald Cities* (1983), a loosely structured soap

opera about West Coast marginals that cost \$21,000, is as tattered and tentative as you might expect of a film shot on a ratio of less than two to one, but Schmidt turns its provisional look into just another aspect of his displaced characters.

Schmidt has low-budget filmmaking down to a science and even teaches a college course called "Feature Filmmaking at Used-Car Prices." His hilarious shadow-of-a-shoestring budget features such important below-the-line expenses as five dollars for clap-stick rental, six for splicing tape, and ten for audiocassettes. Wardrobes tend to spring directly from their owners' closets to the backs of Schmidt's actors. And when the young filmmaker lists his other big assets on the film, his kindly landlord, who waited eight months for the rent, and his



Activist Evelyn Blackwell in Haile Gerima's *Ashes and Embers*.

sympathetic local lab owner, who waited even longer for payment, figure prominently.

"Grab it, snap it, take it" was Lizzie Borden's motto as she roamed the streets of New York with her motley crew during the five-year making of her \$40,000 *Born in Flames* (color, 16mm, ninety minutes). "We worked like guerrillas, doing half-hour setups with a two-person crew," explains Borden, who recorded the sound for most of the 1983 film as well as directing, editing, and fending off curious pedestrians. It deals with an underground of militant women who, ten years after a social democratic transformation of the United

States, are planning a rebellion. *Flames* has a smeary, deliberately helter-skelter look, reflecting both the crew's improvised life-style and Borden's reliance on multiple cinematographers.

For the sound track—a hip blend of female rap and songster riffs—Borden recruited women's bands from Lower Manhattan, where she lives. With funding trickling in over the years (her largest cash lump was \$15,000 from the Jerome Foundation), Borden did a lot of bartering. And money earned in her marathon commercial editing gigs would go immediately to buy stock and set up a shoot.

Borden always made sure her low-paid crews enjoyed the process: "I tried to make the sessions fun and fast; nobody—especially nonprofessionals—likes to wait around." Many of the nonprofessionals she used were happy to pick up the tricks of the trade. Borden's powers of persuasion came to the fore in her dealings with the lab. One lab owner adopted her early on in the project, and offered to develop the film for free a few rolls at a time—not realizing that this would go on for years.

Michael Oblowitz is an up-and-coming young filmmaker whose stylish black-and-white work radiates a nihilism that strikes deeper than its fashionable punkster patina. He recruits his talent close to home, in downtown Manhattan: he wrote the script for his first feature, the 1982 *King Blank* (16mm, eighty-eight minutes), on the basis of audiotapes made by Rosemary Hochschild at a topless bar. Hochschild, a downtown performance artist, also stars in the film, along with Ron Vawter, an agile performer best known for his work with the experimental-theater company the Wooster Group.

Oblowitz has a big advantage as a director in that he makes his living as a cameraman and knows lenses, stocks, and lighting inside out, enabling him to shoot *King Blank* on a ratio of less than two to one. He used very fast Distagon lenses, which allowed him to shoot in available light and save thousands on setup, lighting, and wiring time.

Manhattan is a treasure trove of locations for the enterprising filmmaker, and Oblowitz luxuriates in urban bleakness.

For *King Blank*'s murderous finale in a sleazy motel near Kennedy airport, Oblowitz had to fork over cash—standard room rates for two weekends. He got his money's worth! By the second weekend, the crew, desperate to finish with the site, shot all night. At the end of the thirty-six-hour session, the fake blood splattered all over the walls, the bed, and the couch ensured that the *King Blankers* would be persona non grata forever after. They pulled out at 7:00 A.M. to avoid reprisals from the management.

Like many independents, Chicago-based Michelle Citron wrote her script for *What You Take for Granted*... to fit locations she knew she could use for free. She spent more than a year on preproduction, taping interviews with working women, for her 1983 docu-drama (color, 16mm, seventy-five minutes). The interviews are used to help clarify the problems faced by women working in nontraditional jobs, and the impact of the stress on their personal lives.

For her \$50,000 project, Citron relied on an all-woman crew, which wasn't that easy to assemble in Chicago. The cinematographer, Frances Reid, who works with Iris Film Distributors, came from California, as did the gaffer. The out-of-towners were put up by Citron and her friends for the shoot.

The filmmakers' personal understanding of the problems confronting the characters in the film both hindered and helped the work process. Although the crew constantly argued about the characters, this ferment, in turn, ended up modifying the script.

Since Citron's film was the first all-woman project shot in Chicago that wasn't a student production, people were fascinated to the point of voyeurism during production and were often willing to help out. A top executive catering firm gave the director a big break on its services because the woman owner supported the idea of the film.

Clarence and Angel (1980, color, 16mm, eighty minutes), a lovely, almost abstract story of a kid with a reading problem, was one of the first successful independent features by a black filmmaker—Robert Gardner. "I would keep my eyes peeled when I was walking around, looking for my characters," explains Gardner, a firm advocate of a tight script and typecasting. "The assistant principal worked in a liquor store, and I found Clarence standing in a hallway—something the kid does for most of the movie, too."

Rick Schmidt has low-budget filmmaking down to a science and even teaches a college course called "Feature Filmmaking at Used-Car Prices."

Gardner likes working with children, but admits that it's not as easy as he thought it would be, "because there are the parents." Although the kids turned out to be very responsible about coming to rehearsals, Gardner ran into an unexpected side effect: They spent so much time with him that their parents came to think of him as a baby-sitter, and he wound up providing lunch and dinner to the hordes who stayed on after their scenes were done. The stress that this and other contingencies wreaked on the budget meant that he ran out of money twice before the film was completed. Gardner gratefully mentions credit and discounts extended by Irwin Young, the owner of DuArt Film Laboratories,



Above, Robert Gardner's first film, *Clarence and Angel*; right, feminist Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*.

who, Gardner says, is "a true friend of the independent."

Independents often find that a second feature may be harder to make than a first, because grant possibilities are exhausted and investors are not necessarily any easier to woo. Gardner's \$80,000 budget on *Clarence and Angel* has jumped to a projected \$200,000 for his next film—and he's still struggling to raise the money.

Experimental filmmaker Yvonne Rainer came to the medium from an acclaimed career in choreography. Her 1980 *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (color, 16mm, 125 minutes) was shot in London, Berlin, Stonehenge, Berkeley, and New York; cost only \$60,000; and was begun as "an exercise to keep her hand in [filmmaking]," while she was on an exchange fellowship to West Berlin.

After some initial shooting in Berlin, Rainer submitted her script to the British Film Institute, just when the organization

was radically transforming its production policies. She benefited directly, with a grant for two weeks of complicated shooting. At the editing stage she won an eight-week stipend at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Advanced Visual Studies.

In *Journeys*, Rainer managed to do with carpentry what some need elaborate camerawork to accomplish: For long scenes where "the psychoanalyst" (played alternately by a man, woman, and child) sits behind a desk, she built the seating platform on an incline to give the shrink either a high or low viewpoint vis-à-vis the patient—depending on who's winning the battle of wits.

Rainer worries about future funding for experimental film, noting that in the

United States there is nothing comparable to the commissions offered by European television. Since she has doubled her budget on each successive film, she fears she may soon reach an impasse herself.

Living in a hotbed of high-cost filmmaking, relatively few Los Angeles independents even consider taking on a budget of under \$100,000. However, director Jeanne Collachia and her husband and coproducer, Charles Domokos, decided that with careful planning and clever bartering they could bring Collachia's script to life for \$75,000. *The Audition* (1984, color, 16mm, ninety minutes) is about a poor Chinese-American girl who, encouraged by a Catholic priest, dreams of becoming an

Continued on page 53

the Showscan and which he describes as "at this moment of time the biggest visual effects facility on the planet," will continue to hire itself out to Hollywood). He is also convincingly unperturbed about opening in a pizza place. "The movie industry is just going to have to quit being snobby," he says. "The quality of motion picture presentation is incredibly low today." And he's quite right, as anyone who attends movies regularly can vouch for. Theaters Brock and Trumbull are building are as much state-of-the-art as Showscan itself. With a big, seventeen-by-thirty-three-foot screen, steeply raked floor, and shallow seating arrangement for about a hundred people, each identical SuperCinema is indeed a splendid showcase. You can't even tell you're next door to a video arcade, which produces one of the world's truly frightening walls of noise—it cannot be heard at all in the theater, even when Showscan's six-track Dolby stereo is turned off.

What Trumbull will have to worry about is quality control. "The human element at the projection booth is the weakest link in the whole system," he admits. Projectionists are being specially trained for the new operation, which will eventually be converted to large horizontal platters to minimize the handling of the prints, since the reels are extraordinarily heavy. Trumbull is experimenting with new technology in this area, such as unsprocketed film and electronic drives, which would benefit the industry at large. "The whole medium of motion pictures—which is strips of plastic, with sprockets and cams and mechanical movements—is totally archaic, relative to the technical base that we have available today. A home video recorder that you can buy for \$500 is much, much more sophisticated than any theatrical motion picture projector in the world. That's pathetic."

Trumbull doesn't know yet how long the films will run at each theater, although his guess is six weeks. After *New Magic* is played out, he plans to open *Big Ball*, a dune-buggy saga that, from its trailers, looks like any other clean-cut, action-packed tale of teens and their wheels. But he says he has all kinds of things in development, including a six-part space adventure as well as music "videos." Will he concentrate on novelties and big effects, the way 3-D did when it was introduced? Well, the most heartening thing about *New Magic* is that although it has plenty of comin'-at-ya thrills—like gliding over precipices, crashing through the surf, careening down the highway on a motorcycle—it's most impressive "trick" is Gerrit Graham's

quiet bit of interaction with the audience. They love it.

Their enthusiasm, Trumbull insists, "is not a voyeuristic third-person response." And it may be that Showscan will find its special gift in this kind of "face-to-face" encounter with the audience. "In regular films you don't have shots with actors looking into the camera—you avoid that like the plague. Regular films can't deliver that experience," he says. "The idea of creating a motion picture event that appears to be actually happening in the theater in real time is absolutely unique—it has never been achieved in the history of motion pictures."

"We can certainly make an absolutely conventional film with Showscan and just add to it this greater clarity and greater depth, but the thing that I'm most fascinated with as a filmmaker is, what does Showscan bring that creates a different convention? Do you edit differently? Is the audience's experience different? What are the big questions here? I think that every one of the films that we make over the next few years will give us opportunities to explore these questions." ■

Pat Dowell is a senior editor of *American Film*. Ray Heinrich is a digital electronics designer with an interest in image technology.

TEN MOVIES ✓

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actress.

Domokos describes himself as a small-time producer who has made thirty to forty industrial films, and who is thus able to draw on a large pool of contacts in the field, as well as assorted leftover matériel from completed projects. He believes contacts are a key factor in mounting a professional production and recruited many of his to work on *The Audition*. "Shooting six to eight days and then retiring to prepare the next sequence gives you the possibility of higher production values, especially when it's very experienced professionals who are doing the planning. We always arranged our shoots so we would do the artistic work in advance."

Collachia, too, relied on some of her personal resources. The director obtained an expensive Steadicam camera by waiting until some friends bought one and wanted to experiment with it—thus getting a break on otherwise sky-high rates. To guide her volunteer hairstylists during a sock-hop scene set in San Francisco in the sixties, she combed her old high school yearbooks and *Seventeen* magazines for photos of extreme makeup and hairdos. Collachia traded time

teaching extracurricular film classes at Immaculate Heart High School for low-cost shoots at the school.

Haile Gerima's central precept in making modestly budgeted films is to work within a community—in his case the black community of Washington, D.C. His 1982 *Ashes and Embers* (color, 16mm, 120 minutes), about a Vietnam veteran's adjustment to a troubled, racist society, was the outcome of ten years of thinking, observing, and talking. One of the strengths of this collaborative approach is that people stay involved and loyal to the project, helping to enrich the ideas over time. Like several other directors who work with low budgets, Gerima relies on students and facilities at a university (he teaches at Howard).

Gerima prefers to mix professional and unskilled people, both to bring his films home cheaply and to apprentice black people in film technique. He holds a month-long crash production workshop before filming to ensure that his shoots, attended by so many novices, won't deteriorate into frantic scrambles.

Known for his elaborate and nuanced sound tracks, the filmmaker, nevertheless, cannot afford to spend much time in the mixing studio, which normally costs \$250 an hour. Instead, he lays out complex, precise diagrams for music, sound, and effects, and then builds as many as thirteen tracks in the editing room, three at a time—the maximum his Steenbeck can handle. Working this way means that he can't hear some effects except in his head until the mixing stage, but the risk is worth it.

The independent film scene is alive and kicking in 1984, despite a tight money situation that has everyone worried about the future. Survival strategies range from constantly bartering one's professional skills, to sweet-talking landlords, to frantically juggling credit cards, to obsessively bargain hunting for stock, processing, and equipment deals. These filmmakers have two things in common: a golden tongue (with a willingness to use it on any and all occasions for recruiting) and a penchant for playing the one-man band (or, more correctly, one-person band, since women figure prominently in the low-budget scene). What this adds up to is aptly described by Lizzie Borden: "Making a film is like having a child—you do things for your kid you would never do for yourself." ■

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