Virtual November 10, 2020 (41:11)
Richard Rush: **THE STUNT MAN** (1980, 131m)
Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries

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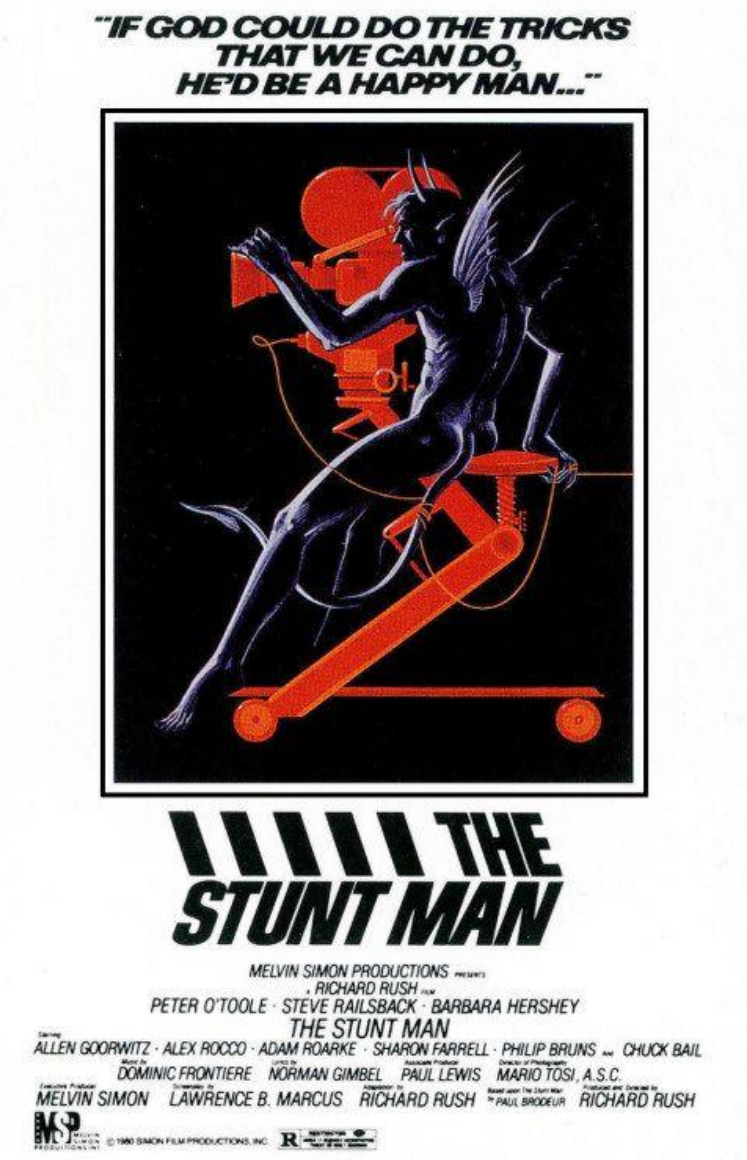
[Vimeo link for **ALL** of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the Fall 2020 BFS]

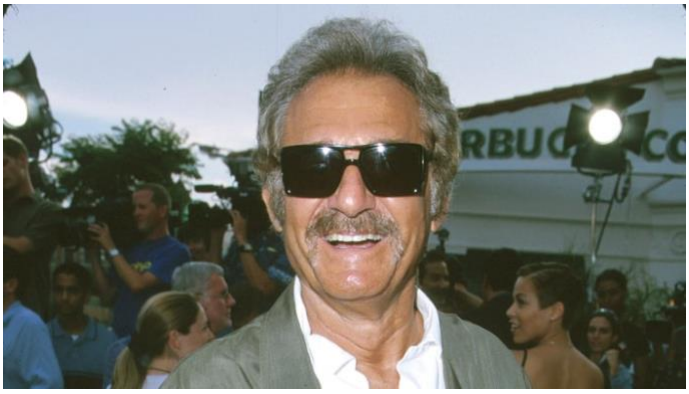
Zoom link for *all* Fall 2020 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:
https://buffalo.zoom.us/j/92994947964?pwd=dDBWcDYvSlhPbkd4TkswcUhiQWkydz09
Meeting ID: 929 9494 7964
Passcode: 703450



Directed by Richard Rush
Screenplay by Lawrence B. Marcus
Adaptation by Richard Rush
Based on the novel by Paul Brodeur
Produced by Richard Rush
Original Music by Dominic Frontiere
Cinematography by Mario Tosi
Film Editing by Caroline Biggerstaff, Jack Hofstra
Art Direction by James L. Schoppe
Set Decoration by Richard Spero
Costume Design by Rosanna Norton

Peter O'Toole…Eli Cross
Steve Railsback…Cameron
Barbara Hershey…Nina Franklin
Allen Garfield… Sam (as Allen Goorwitz)
Alex Rocco…Police Chief Jake
Sharon Farrell…Denise
Adam Roarke…Raymond Bailey
Philip Bruns…Ace
Charles Bail…Chuck Barton
John Garwood…Gabe
Jim Hess…Henry
John Pearce…Garage Guard
Michael Railsback…Burt
George Wallace…Nina's Father
Dee Carroll…Nina's Mother
Leslie Winograde…Nina's Sister
Don Kennedy…Lineman
Whitey Hughes…Eli's Assistant Director
Walter Robles…Eli's Assistant Director
A.J. Bakunas…Eli's Script Clerk
Roberto Caruso…Cop #1
Frank Avila…Cop #2
Stafford Morgan…FBI Agent Thompson
John Alderman…Carlbinarri
Jack Palinkas…Technician
James Garrett…Technician #2 (as Cecil Brittain)
Garrett McPherson…Tourist
Nelson Tyler…Elk's Crane Cameraman
Louis Gartner…Brothel Man #1

Stunts
Phil Adams, A.J. Bakunas, Gregory J. Barnett, Gary Baxley, Wayne Berg (stunt pilot), Norman Blankenship, Hank Calia, Deanna Dae Coleman, Erik Cord, Ted Duncan, Larry Dunn, Kenny Endoso, Whitey Hughes, Gray Johnson (stunt coordinator), Gray Johnson, Mike Johnson, Alton Leo Jones, John Kazian (wing walker), Tom Morga, Regis Parton, Don Pulford, Walter Robles, Dick Warlock, James Winburn, Charles Bail, Ross Reynolds, Jim Appleby (head pilot: WWI-planes), Ross Reynolds (helicopter pilot), Dean Westgaard (parachutist)



Richard Rush (April 15, 1929, New York City, New York) has 14 directing credits: 2000 *The Sinister Saga of Making "The Stunt Man,"* 1994 *Color of Night*, 1980 *The Stunt Man*, 1974 *Freebie and the Bean*, 1970 *Getting Straight*, 1968 *Mod Squad*, 1968 *The Savage Seven*, 1968 *A Man Called Dagger*, 1968 *Psych-Out*, 1967 *Hells Angels on Wheels*, 1967 *The Cups of San Sebastian*, 1967 *Thunder Alley*, 1963 *Of Love and Desire*, and 1960 *Too Soon to Love*.

Lawrence B. Marcus (July 19, 1917, Beaver, Utah – August 28, 2001, Woodland Hills, Los Angeles, California) has 13 screenwriting credits: 1984 *Threesome*, 1982 *Witness for the Prosecution* (adaptation), 1982 *The Letter*, 1981 *The Five of Me*, 1980 *The Stunt Man*, 1976 *Alex & the Gypsy*, 1971 *Going Home*, 1969 *Justine*, 1968 *Petulia*, 1967 *A Covenant with Death*, 1965 *Brainstorm* (story), 1962 *Alcoa Premiere*, and 1953-1955 *Rheingold Theatre* (7 episodes).

Mario Tosi (1942, Rome, Lazio, Italy) has 33 cinematographer credits: 1982 *Six Pack*, 1981 *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, 1980 *Coast to Coast*, 1980 *Resurrection*, 1980 *The Stunt Man*, 1979 *The Main Event*, 1978 *Sergeant Matlovich vs. the U.S. Air Force*, 1978 *The Betsy*, 1977 *MacArthur*, 1976 Sybil, 1976 *Carrie*, 1976 *Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys*, 1975 *Hearts of the West*, 1975 *Man on the Outside*, 1975 *Friendly Persuasion*, 1975 *Smoke in the Wind*, 1975 *Report to the Commissioner*, 1974 *Reflections of Murder*, 1974 *Buster and Billie*, 1974 *The Stranger Who Looks Like Me*, 1973 *A Summer Without Boys*, 1973 *Some Call It Loving*, 1973 *Kojak*, 1973 *The Killing Kind*, 1972 *Outside In*, 1972 *Frogs*, 1968 *Terror in the Jungle*, 1967 *The Glory Stompers*, 1966 *Swamp Country*, 1965 *Handle with Care*, 1964 *Sinderella and the Golden Bra*, 1964 *How to Succeed with Girls*, and 1963 *A Chance to Live*.

Peter O'Toole (b. Peter Seamus O'Toole, August 2, 1932, Connemara, County Galway, Ireland—d. December 14, 2013 (age 81) in London, England, UK) had 99 acting credits, some of which were 2012 *Katherine of Alexandria*, 2010 *Eager to Die*, 2008 *Dean Spanley*, 2008 *The Tudors* (7 episodes), 2007 *Stardust*, 2007 *Ratatouille*, 2006/I *Venus*, 2005 *Lassie*, 2005 Casanova, 2004 *Troy*, 2003 *Hitler: The Rise of Evil*, 2003 *Bright Young Things*, 2002 *The Final Curtain*, 1999 *Joan of Arc*, 1999 *Molokai*, 1999 *The Manor*, 1998 *Phantoms*, 1997 *Fairy Tale: A True Story*, 1996 *Gulliver's Travels*, 1993 *The Seventh Coin*, 1991 *Isabelle Eberhardt*, 1991 *King Ralph*, 1990 *The Rainbow Thief*, 1988 *High Spirits*, 1987 *The Last Emperor*, 1986 *Club Paradise*, 1985 *Creator*, 1984 *Supergirl*, 1983 *Svengali*, 1983 *Sherlock Holmes and the Baskerville Curse*, 1983 *Sherlock Holmes and the Valley of Fear*, 1983 *Sherlock Holmes and the Sign of Four*, 1983 *Sherlock Holmes and a Study in Scarlet*, 1983 *Pygmalion*, 1982 *Man and Superman*, 1982 *My Favorite Year*, 1981 Masada, 1980 *The Stunt Man*, 1980 *Strumpet City*, 1979 *Caligula*, 1979 *Zulu Dawn*, 1977 *Rogue Male*, 1975 *Man Friday*, 1975 *Rosebud*, 1972 *Man of La Mancha*, 1972 *The Ruling Class*, 1972 *Under Milk Wood*, 1971 *Murphy's War*, 1969 *Brotherly Love*, 1969 *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, 1968 *The Lion in Winter*, 1967 *The Night of the Generals*, 1966 *How to Steal a Million*, 1965 *What's New Pussycat*, 1965 *Lord Jim*, 1964 *Becket*, 1962 *Lawrence of Arabia*, 1960 *The Savage Innocents*, 1960 *Kidnapped*, 1958 *The Castiglioni Brothers*, and 1956 *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Steve Railsback (Stephen Hall Railsback, November 16, 1945, Dallas, Texas) has 89 acting credits, some of which are 2013 *Infiltrators*, 2012 Femme Fatales, 2010 *Once Fallen*, 2009 *Follow the Prophet*, 2009 *Ready or Not*, 2005 *King of the Lost World*, 2005 *Kojak*, 2005 *The Devil's Rejects*, 2003 *The Hitcher II: I've Been Waiting*, 2003/I *The Box*, 2002 *Slash*, 2001 *The Practice*, 2000 *Say Goodnight, Michael*, 1999 *Made Men*, 1998 *Termination Man*, 1997-1998 The Visitor (13 episodes), 1996 *Street Corner Justice*, 1996 *Barb Wire*, 1995 *Walker, Texas Ranger*, 1994 *The X-Files*, 1993 *Private Wars*, 1993 *Calendar Girl*, 1993 *In the Line of Fire*, 1991 *Alligator II: The Mutation*, 1991 *Scissors*, 1990 *The Assassin*, 1988 *Nukie*, 1988 *Deadly Intent*, 1987 *Blue Monkey*, 1987 *The Survivalist*, 1987 *Distortions*, 1986 *Armed and Dangerous*, 1986 *The Twilight Zone*, 1985 *Torchlight*, 1985 *The Hitchhiker*, 1983 *The Golden Seal*, 1982 *Escape 2000*, 1982 *Deadly Games*, 1980 *The Stunt Man*, 1979 *From Here to Eternity*, 1976 *Helter Skelter*, 1976 *Charlie Siringo*, 1974 *Cockfighter*, and 1972 *The Visitors*.

Barbara Hershey (b. Barbara Lynn Herzstein, February 5, 1948, Hollywood, Los Angeles, California) has 103 acting credits, some of which are 2012 *Once Upon a Time*, 2011 *Answers to Nothing*, 2010/I *Insidious*, 2010 *Black Swan*, 2009 *Albert Schweitzer*, 2008 *Anne of Green Gables: A New Beginning*, 2008 *Childless*, 2004-2005 *The Mountain* (13 episodes), 2004 *Riding the Bullet*, 2003 *Hunger Point*, 2002 *Daniel Deronda*, 1999-2000 *Chicago Hope* (22 episodes), 1999 *Breakfast of Champions*, 1998 *Frogs for Snakes*, 1996 *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1996 *The Pallbearer*, 1993 *Return to Lonesome Dove*, 1993 *Falling Down*, 1991 *Paris Trout*, 1988 *Beaches*, 1988 *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1987 *Tin Men*,

1986 *Hoosiers*, 1986 *Hannah and Her Sisters*, 1986 *Passion Flower*, 1985 *My Wicked, Wicked Ways: The Legend of Errol Flynn*, 1984 *The Natural*, 1983 *The Right Stuff*, 1982 *American Playhouse*, 1981 *Take This Job and Shove It*, 1980 *The Stunt Man*, 1980 *Angel on My Shoulder*, 1980 *From Here to Eternity*, 1977 *In the Glitter Palace*, 1976 *The Last Hard Men*, 1975 *You and Me*, 1974 *Kung Fu*, 1973 *Love Comes Quietly*, 1972 *Boxcar Bertha*, 1972 *Dealing: Or the Berkeley-to-Boston Forty-Brick Lost-Bag Blues*, 1970 *The Baby Maker*, 1970 *The Liberation of L.B. Jones*, 1969 *Last Summer*, 1968 *With Six You Get Eggroll*, 1967 *Daniel Boone*, 1966-1967 *The Monroes* (26 episodes), 1965-1966 Gidget, 1966 *The Farmer's Daughter*. She was so impressed by Richard Bach's book, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (1970), that for several years she used the screen name Barbara Seagull. Then she apparently lost interest in the book and went back to her first stage name, Barbara Hershey.

Allen Garfield (b. Allen Goorwitz, November 22, 1939, Newark, New Jersey—d. April 7, 2020, Motion Picture & Television Country House and Hospital, Los Angeles, CA) appeared in 119 films and TV programs, sometimes under his own name, sometimes as Allen Garfield. Some of his credits are 2002 *White Boy*, 2001 *The Majestic*, 2000 *The West Wing*, 2000 *Men Named Milo, Women Named Greta*, 1999 *The Ninth Gate*, 1998 *Dharma & Greg*, 1996 *Crime of the Century*, 1995 *Wild Side*, 1994-1995 *Chicago Hope*, 1993 Jack's Place, 1993/I *The Waiter*, 1992 *Miracle Beach*, 1992 *Citizen Cohn*, 1992 *Law & Order*, 1990 *Club Fed*, 1990 *Dick Tracy*, 1990 *Matlock*, 1989 *Let It Ride*, 1988 *Tales from the Darkside*, 1987 *Beverly Hills Cop II*, 1986 *Killer in the Mirror*, 1986 *Sins*, 1986 *Desert Bloom*, 1984 *The Cotton Club*, 1984 *Teachers*, 1983 *Get Crazy*, 1983 *The Black Stallion Returns*, 1982 *The State of Things*, 1982 *One from the Heart*, 1981 *Continental Divide*, 1980 *One Trick Pony*, 1980 *The Stunt Man*, 1980 *Trapper John, M.D.*, 1978 *The Brink's Job*, 1976 *Serpico*, 1976 *Paco*, 1976 *Mother, Jugs & Speed*, 1976 *Gable and Lombard*, 1976 *The Commitment*, 1975 *Nashville*, 1975 *Gunsmoke*, 1975 *Rhoda*, 1974 *Virginia Hill*, 1974 *The Conversation*, 1974 *Busting*, 1974 *Judgment: The Trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg*, 1973 *Ironside*, 1973 *Kojak*, 1973 *Slither*,1972 *Love, American Style*, 1972 *Get to Know Your Rabbit*, 1972 *The Candidate*, 1972 *Top of the Heap*, 1972 *McCloud*, 1971 *Bonanza*, 1971 *The Organization*, 1971 *Bananas*, 1971 *Taking Off*, 1971 *Mod Squad*, 1970 *The Owl and the Pussycat*, 1970 *The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful*, 1969 *Putney Swope*, 1968 *Greetings*, and 1968 *Orgy Girls '69*

ALEX ROCCO (b. Alexander Federico Petricone Jr., February 29, 1936, Boston, Massachusetts—d. July 18, 2015, Studio City, CA) has 158 acting credits among which are 2012 Private Practice, 2012 Magic City, 2010/I *Now Here*, 2009 *Ready or Not*, 2006 *Smokin' Aces*, 2006 *Find Me Guilty*, 2005 *Crazylove*, 2001-2004 *The Division* (14 episodes), 2003 *Lucky*, 2002 *The Country Bears*, 2001 *Italian Ties*, 2000 *Walker, Texas Ranger*, 1999 *Dudley Do-Right*, 1998 *Goodbye Lover*, 1997 *Just Write*, 1996 *The Flight of the Dove*, 1996 *Dead of Night*, 1994-1995 *The George Carlin Show* (27 episodes), 1993 *Daddy Dearest*, 1993 *Love, Honor & Obey: The Last Mafia Marriage*, 1991-1992 *Sibs* (22 episodes), 1991 *The Pope Must Diet*, 1990 *A Quiet Little Neighborhood, A Perfect Little Murder*, 1990 *How to Murder a Millionaire*, 1989-1990 *The Famous Teddy Z* (20 episodes), 1989 *Wired*, 1981-1988 *The Facts of Life* (11 episodes), 1987 *Hotel*, 1987 *Return to Horror High*, 1985-1986 *Murder, She Wrote*, 1985 *Gotcha!*, 1985 *The A-Team*, 1984 *St. Elsewhere*, 1984 *Cannonball Run II*, 1984 *Matt Houston*, 1982 *The Entity*, 1981 *Nobody's Perfekt*, 1980 *The Stunt Man*, 1980 *Herbie Goes Bananas*, 1979 *Voices*, 1978 *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*, 1978 *Rabbit Test*, 1977 *Starsky and Hutch*, 1977 *The Godfather: A Novel for Television*, 1977 *Harold Robbins' 79 Park Avenue*, 1977 *Baretta*, 1977 *Barnaby Jones*, 1977 *The Rockford Files*, 1975-1977 *Police Story*, 1977 *Mary Tyler Moore*, 1975 *Three for the Road* (13 episodes), 1975 *Hearts of the West*, 1975 *The Blue Knight*, 1972-1975 *Cannon*, 1975 *Rafferty and the Gold Dust Twins*, 1974 *Freebie and the Bean*, 1974 *The Rookies*, 1973 *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, 1973 *Slither*, 1972 *The Outside Man*, 1972 *The F.B.I.*, 1972 *The Godfather*, 1971 *Wild Riders*, 1970-1971 *That Girl*, 1970 *Blood Mania*, 1968 *The Boston Strangler*, 1967 *Get Smart*, 1967 *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre*, 1967 *Batman*, 1967 *Run for Your Life*, and 1965 *Motor Psycho.* He is perhaps best known for Francis Ford Coppola's moment of movie magic when, in *The Godfather*, he appears to have been shot in the eye during a massage in Las Vegas.

<u>RICHARD RUSH, From Wikipedia</u>

Richard Rush (born April 15, 1929, in New York City) is an American movie director, scriptwriter, and producer. He is best known for the Oscar-nominated *The Stunt Man*. His other works, however, have been less celebrated. The next best-known of his movies is *Color of Night* — also nominated, but in this case for the Golden Raspberry Award. Rush also directed *Freebie and The Bean*, an over-the-top police buddy comedy/drama starring Alan Arkin and James Caan. He co-wrote the screenplay for the 1990 movie *Air America*.

Rush spent his childhood fascinated by Marcel Proust and Batman comics. He was one of the first students of UCLA's film program, and, after graduation, Rush worked to create television programs for the United States military showcasing the nation's involvement in the Korean War. While he agreed with the military's involvement in the region, Rush's participation in this largely symbolic conflict can be seen as a defining event for the director who later explained: "There's a recurring theme that I keep getting attracted to in film. . . .

Being unable to accept truth, we have a tendency to accept systems, and to believe in a series of learned homilies and arbitrary rituals of good and evil, right and wrong. Magic, king, country, mother, God, all those burning truths we got from our early bathroom training from bumper stickers and from crocheted pillow cases. When it's right to kill. When it's not right to kill. Under what circumstances. Arbitrary rules invented for the occasion. And we really dedicate ourselves to them ferociously. And they tend to obscure any real human feeling or any real morality that might emerge to substitute for it."

After his propaganda work, Rush opened a production company to produce commercials and industrial films. At the age of thirty, inspired by the neo-realism of French director François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, Rush sold his production business to finance his first feature *Too Soon to Love* (1960), which he produced on a shoestring budget of $50,000 and sold to Universal Pictures for distribution. *Too Soon to Love* is considered the first product of the "American New Wave." It also marked the second film appearance of Jack Nicholson (who starred in two later Rush films, *Hells Angels on Wheels* and *Psych-Out*).

Rush directed three films for AIP in the late 1960s exploring counter-cultures of the period and also introducing racking focus, a technique Rush claims to have discovered and named. Rush's first studio effort was 1970's *Getting Straight*, starring Elliott Gould and Candice Bergen. The film did well commercially and was deemed by Swedish director Ingmar Bergman to be the "best American film of the decade." Rush's next movie, in 1974, was *Freebie and the Bean*. For the most part, *Freebie* was critically panned, though director Stanley Kubrick called it "the best movie of the year."

In 1981, Truffaut was asked "Who is your favorite American director?" He answered, "I don't know his name, but I saw his film last night and it was called *The Stunt Man*." The film, which took Rush nine years to put together, was a slapstick comedy, a thriller, a romance, an action-adventure, and a commentary on America's dismissal of veterans, as well as a deconstruction of Hollywood cinema. The film also features Rush's typical protagonist, an emotionally traumatized male who has escaped the traditional frameworks of society only to find his new world (biker gangs in *Hells Angels on Wheels*, hippies in *Psych-Out*) corrupted by the same influences. *The Stunt Man* won Rush Oscar nominations for best producer and best script.

When *Air America* showed signs of trouble during development, Rush was given $4 million to walk away from the project. This allowed the studio to cast Mel Gibson and Robert Downey, Jr.

Rush did not direct another film for fourteen years — 1994's critically panned *Color of Night*. Afterward, Rush retreated from the world of commercial cinema. As Kenneth Turan of The Los Angeles Times wrote, Rush's career seems to be "followed by the kind of miserable luck that never seems to afflict the untalented."

His most recent project is a DVD documentary on the making of *The Stunt Man entitled The Sinister Saga of Making The Stunt Man* (2001).

He currently resides in Bel Air with his wife Claudia. He has an older brother, Dr. Stephen Rush who also resides in Los Angeles.

Matthew Halverson, "The Movie Seattle Saved," *Seattle Met*, 13 July 2009

On a mid-August afternoon in 1979, William Arnold slumped in the dark of a pool-house screening room, dreading the whir of the projector. *I am going to hate this movie*, he thought. Even then, at the beginning of what would be a 30-year career as the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*'s film critic, Arnold, 31, knew better than to prejudge a picture. But this wasn't so much a writing assignment as an awkward obligation born out of his occupation's influence, and the movie had all the makings of a bomb.

Earlier in the week, Noel Marshall, the Hollywood producer who had tried unsuccessfully to adapt *Shadowland*, Arnold's 1978 investigative book about Frances Farmer's psychiatric care, called from Los Angeles: "Could you do a favor for an old director friend of mine?" Richard Rush was bringing his struggling, unreleased film, *The Stunt Man*, to Seattle for an exclusive, one-night sneak preview on Saturday, August 25, but the film's producers refused to spend money to promote it. "Richard's made a fantastic film," Marshall insisted, "but the people who financed it can't stand it, and nobody wants to release it. I'd really like you to take a look at it." Rush was counting on the last-ditch Seattle screening to build buzz and convince his investor, Melvin Simon Productions, that the film was worth releasing, but without any advance advertising, he needed a positive review in the *P-I* to lure an audience to the theater. So Marshall was leaning on Arnold, coaxing the young critic to fly to Los Angeles for a

private screening at Rush's home in Bel Air, California.

Arnold acquiesced—agreeing to Rush's request that he run a review before the sneak only if he liked the movie—but instantly regretted the decision. Usually, when a producer or studio wanted to shelve one of its pictures, as Rush insisted that his producers were doing to *The Stunt Man*, it was for a good reason. Anyone who'd seen Simon's campy vampire spoof *Love at First Bite* earlier that spring knew that even a halfway decent movie could make a lot of money. And if Rush's picture couldn't pass Melvin Simon's less-than-exacting smell test, it had to be an epic dud.

So there Arnold sat in Rush's pool house, thinking more about the flight home to Seattle than the movie he'd come to LA to watch, when Rush flipped a switch and the screen lit up with the image of a lone buzzard perched on a light pole. And for the next 130 minutes Arnold's jaw hung slightly slack. Relative newcomer Steve Railsback played a young, on-the-lam convict who stumbles onto the set of a World War I action movie, where the film's manipulative, dictatorial director, played by Peter O'Toole, offers him asylum if he'll work as the leading man's stunt double. Told almost exclusively from the convict's perspective, who constantly questions whether his savior is trying to snuff him out on film, *The Stunt Man* was an unconventional—and at times off-putting—narrative that suffocated its viewer with Railsback's paranoia as it played with the difference between perception and reality.

Arnold was dumbfounded. He had just watched "one of the most innovative and exciting films to emerge from the American cinema in a long, long time," as he would write in his review on Friday, August 24—but Rush was convinced that the moneymen behind the picture wanted to kill it.

Richard Rush was a cinematic enigma. He directed his first 10 movies before *The Stunt Man* (including several exploitation flicks such as *The Savage Seven* and *Hells Angels on Wheels*) with a propulsive, gonzo flair that infused the B movie genre with an unexpected level of artistic legitimacy and elevated him to something of a cult auteur.

He'd taken an abrupt turn with his latest, though. Part thriller, part love story, part Hollywood satire—hell, part *comedy*—it relentlessly toyed with its viewers, daring them to believe that the megalomaniacal director of the movie within the movie was trying to kill his new stuntman. Based loosely on a 1971 book of the same name by Paul Brodeur, the film was layered in subtext, narratively ambitious, and anchored by morally ambiguous characters. And according to Arnold it was "an absolute knockout."

Rush's standing in Hollywood was just as perplexing as his resume. Cult status like the kind he enjoyed earned you plenty of fiercely loyal fans but little clout. So it was odd that despite having never achieved anything nearing blockbuster success, the uncompromising perfectionist had developed a knack for wearing down studio executives to get his way. "It would be Tuesday, but Dick could talk you into believing it was Wednesday," says Bob Relyea, then the head of physical production at Melvin Simon Productions and one of Rush's few supporters within the company. "Or you'd at least come away thinking, You know, it may be Tuesday and it may not."

So Rush was shocked to learn that after he'd lobbied hard to host *The Stunt Man*'s sneak preview at a University District cinema—where the young, arts-minded clientele would be more receptive to the film's unconventional storyline—the producers chose -Bellevue's Overlake Cinema instead. Overruling him was one thing, but why would they make the savvy decision to sneak the movie in Seattle—which research had shown was a national box-office bellwether—only to inexplicably bury it in an obscure, out-of-the-way movie house? "The joke when it opened," says former *Seattle Times* film critic John Hartl, "was that if you could find the theater you got in for free."

Arnold had made it clear before he left Bel Air that he loved *The Stunt Man* and vowed to do whatever he could to help the picture succeed. It wasn't until Rush showed up at the Overlake with the movie's seven reels of film under his arms, though, that he realized how powerful the critic's endorsement could be. By splashing the movie across the cover of the *P-I* 's weekend entertainment guide the day before ("I didn't have a boss, so I just did what I wanted to do," he says) and raving in his review that it was "an affirmation of hope for an exciting new American cinema in the 1980s," Arnold drew a movie-geek mob of hundreds to Bellevue. If the atmosphere outside the theater a half hour before showtime was any indication, even banishing the movie to Carnation wouldn't have kept the crowds from tracking it down. "We had a line around the block," Rush says. "And it was a noisy crowd, one that shouts at the screen and claps. I knew it was my kind of crowd, and I knew it was going to be good."

Drawing on his antiwar leafleting past, Jeff Dowd distributed fliers to promote *The Stunt Man*.

It was good. Rush sat in the back of the theater in an aisle seat, watching calmly as the raucous audience laughed and gasped and cheered at all the right times. And after the projector stopped, they hung around in the lobby, quizzing him on the production and filling out preview cards (the Hollywood equivalent of a restaurant comment card). Roughly 95 percent rated *The Stunt Man* as good or excellent. Maybe its residents were just happy to be out of the rain, but Seattle was establishing itself as a film--loving city that was artistically hip without the attendant cultural elitism. "In the Northeast, audiences frequently went to films with an attitude of, 'Let me see if I can figure out where this film is flawed,' " says Larry Jackson, a former managing director of a cinema complex in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and onetime producer who helped Rush in his quest to get *The Stunt Man* released. "But the

audiences in Seattle went to films expecting to enjoy them, wanting to embrace everything they could about them."

And yet. with the sneak preview over, Melvin Simon Productions had no plans for future screenings; it was as if Seattle—with its wildly enthusiastic crowd and its history for predicting box office success everywhere from Dallas to Detroit—didn't exist. "They just didn't think *The Stunt Man* was releasable," Jackson says of the producers. "They said, 'Well, Seattle is Seattle,' " and dismissed the city, he says, with a wave of the hand and a "Forget it, Jake; it's Chinatown," finality. So Rush packed up his film, flew back to LA after the sneak, and stashed it in his pool house, where it would sit until after the new year, when he got another call from Seattle.

Randy Finley didn't like to take chances when booking movies for the Guild 45th Theatre. He took it so seriously that during his 18 years as owner of Seattle's Seven Gables Theatres chain, he recruited a small cadre of film-buff confidantes who would join him at screenings and then debate whether what they'd seen met Seven Gables' standards: Could it generate compelling word of mouth? Would it get great critical support? Did they like the people behind the picture? He took a lot of pride in having run movies like *The Black Stallion* and *Harold and Maude* in his theaters when others wouldn't. And he took even more pride in turning them into art house hits. "If you went to the Guild 45th when I was booking it," Finley says, "you would walk out thinking you'd just seen one of the best pictures of the year—if not the best."

Based on Arnold's unequivocally favorable review, Finley knew *The Stunt Man* met at least one of his group's three criteria. What he didn't know was whether he'd like Rush or whether the movie could inspire devoted audiences to do the advertising for him. But after watching it with the fevered crowd at the Overlake Cinema that August night and then listening to the director passionately recount his fight to keep it alive, he decided he had to run it in the Wallingford outpost of his mini multiplex empire. "What happened to Richard should have never happened," Finley says, referring to Rush's struggle with releasing the movie. "All he did was make a good picture."

Giddy at the prospect of having found another sleeper hit, Finley walked to the parking lot, still peeling apart the picture's layers of subtext with Jeff Dowd, an employee who oversaw his theaters' promotions and did some booking for Finley's distribution company. But when they got to Finley's car, they were hit with a bucket of cold water in the form of a note under the windshield wiper. It was from Ruth Hayler, another employee who'd also trekked out to Bellevue: "Randy, I don't think this picture is going to make it. Jeff's probably going to like it. Please don't risk a lot of money on it. Ruth."

Hayler was young and fresh out of graduate school, while Finley had been booking movies for a decade, but he couldn't just ignore her opinion out of hand. What if hers represented a more mainstream, commercial audience's response to *The Stunt Man*? If it hadn't worked for her, it might not work for Finley's loyal patrons, who trusted his judgment and expected cinematic excellence when they bought a ticket at the Guild 45th. Was he willing to jeopardize that trust—and the cash that came along with it—on an unproven picture with negligible support from its producers and a leading man that hadn't had a hit in a decade? He and Dowd ultimately decided on the drive back to Seattle that if they handled the picture correctly, it was worth the risk; Finley called Rush within weeks of the screening to discuss setting up a test run at the Guild 45th the following summer. But they were careful to keep Hayler's reaction in mind.

Building buzz for a movie—at least the way Randy Finley and Jeff Dowd liked to do it—takes work. And it takes time. Months. "To make the movie work properly, things had to be set in motion," Dowd says. "You don't just throw the picture in the theater and open the doors, you know? You need to create awareness. You need to create a sense of 'need to see.' "

Dowd was only 30 at the time, but he'd been winning hearts and minds for years with his intensity and a bullhorn. As a part-time student at Cornell, he was a vocal antiwar activist and a member of the local arm of the Students for a Democratic Society. After graduating and moving to Seattle, he joined the militant Seattle Liberation Front in 1970, helped lead a demonstration at the Federal Courthouse that turned violent, and was charged with conspiracy to destroy federal property alongside six other SLF members. (The press nicknamed them the Seattle Seven.) The charges were dropped in 1973, but Dowd had solidified his reputation as a grassroots organizer. "Jeff was very persuasive," says Jackson, who was a classmate of Dowd's before getting into the movie exhibition business. "Not eloquent, but passionate in a way that became infectious. He was also so dogged that there was no point in saying no to him. He was just going to get into your face until he got what he wanted."

Rush saw the same tenacity in Dowd. "It was like he'd just climbed down from the police barriers," the director says. "He was a real street fighter and approached his publicity that way." And Rush needed a bulldog in Seattle. In early spring 1980, the president of Melvin Simon Productions, Milt Goldstein, had grudgingly agreed to allow the Guild 45th to host an eight-week test engagement of *The Stunt Man* starting June 27, but only on the condition that Finley put up $50,000 for advertising. And the Seven Gables was on its own to promote the picture locally.

That the movie would finally be released—even if it was in only one market—was a huge victory for Rush, but for

his growing team of supporters in Seattle, there were still nagging questions: Why did they have to fight so hard to get this far when audiences seemed to love the picture? What did Mel Simon have to lose by giving it a shot? Rush thought he knew the answer. Simon was a billionaire shopping mall mogul from Indiana and a Hollywood outsider who treated movie production like a hobby. As a result, he left most of the business decisions to Goldstein and his head of marketing, Jonas Rosenfeld. Both claimed publicly that they were having trouble finding a major studio to distribute *The Stunt Man*, but Rush was convinced something much simpler was at play: ego. Before Simon agreed to finance the movie, he had invited Rush, Goldstein (who was then the head of the independent studio Avco Embassy), and another studio executive to discuss the script over drinks at the Polo Lounge in Beverly Hills. The topic: Would *The Stunt Man* have commercial appeal in the overseas market? Goldstein's answer was a flat no. Simon saw something that Goldstein didn't and gave Rush $3.5 million to make his movie anyway. That meant that when Goldstein later joined the company—after *The Stunt Man* was well into postproduction—he inherited a picture he'd gone on record as saying had limited commercial appeal. If the movie did well, Rush surmised, Goldstein's credibility as an arbiter of cinematic taste could suffer. "He'd taken a stand against Mel doing the movie from the beginning and continued to do so after he'd seen a finished cut," Rush says. "He didn't want to be wrong."

Well isn't that a bunch of bullshit?" Goldstein says of Rush's claim. "Who wants to be right or wrong? I want pictures to make money. We get the pictures into the theaters. We can't put the asses in the seats. If you told me how to do that, I'd be a billionaire." (However, Bob Relyea, who worked alongside Goldstein at Melvin Simon Productions and was aware of his battles with Rush, won't dispute the director's assertions. "I suppose I should be tactful," he says, "but I have to say that I think Dick is right.")

Dowd was confident that he could "put the asses in the seats." But he knew from Ruth Hayler's response to *The Stunt Man* that you had to do more than that. Preparing the audience for what it was about to see was just as important. Hayler had watched the movie again after Finley made the deal to host the premiere and had a completely different experience. Aware from her first viewing that there was no archetypal hero to root for, she was able to enjoy the movie for what it was: an unconventional head trip that relied on a mixture of comedy, drama, and action to intentionally disorient viewers and give them no choice but to identify with Railsback's paranoid stuntman. This time she loved it. Dowd knew it was his job to help Seattle audiences adjust their expectations. "We had to explain to people that it was a roller-coaster ride of the imagination," he says.

Finley didn't have money for television advertising—which at that point was rare for movies and virtually unheard of for independent movies—so Dowd resorted to his grassroots methods. He printed up leaflets and handed them out to people lined up at other theaters for the summer's biggest blockbuster, *The Empire Strikes Back*. He brought Railsback and Barbara Hershey (the film's female lead) into town for an all-out media blitz, booking them on local morning news shows and drive-time radio. And Finley enlisted KING-FM and KZAM-FM to give away tickets for advance "word-of-mouth" screenings; when the crowds lined up before showtime, he took pictures and used them in print ads leading up to the premiere to create that "need-to-see" urgency that Dowd wanted. The savviest play may have been the way Dowd preyed upon Seattleites' sense of altruism. Whenever he could, he enlisted the crowds at sneak previews, ratcheting up the drama surrounding the movie's release, to convert them into foot soldiers in the fight to save it. "Look, it's do or die for this picture here in Seattle," he pleaded. "Please, call all of your friends and tell them to go on opening weekend."

With virtually no support from its producers, *The Stunt Man* was becoming the most-talked-about movie in town weeks before it opened. But Finley and Dowd knew that buzz wouldn't necessarily equate to box office, and the stakes were high. A successful run in Seattle could convince Melvin Simon Productions—or a larger studio—to distribute the movie nationally. If no one showed up, though, not only would it kill Rush's chances of saving his baby, but the Guild 45th would have to scramble to find a halfway-decent replacement for two months at the height of the summer movie season. "We had the house on the line for this picture," Dowd says. Three weeks. That's how long Larry Jackson (who in June was helping Rush negotiate a separate eight-week test run at the Avco Centre Cinemas in Westwood, California) estimated *The Stunt Man* needed to perform well in Seattle to attract interest from the major studios. *Three good weeks*, he thought, *and everything else would be gravy*. Take out weekdays, when theater attendance typically drops off anyway, and that left six days. Six days of solid returns and Richard Rush might finally have a chance to show the rest of the country this picture he'd toiled on for years.

It ran at the Guild 45th for 43 weeks.

"I was in the business for 57 years," Bob Relyea says, "and I never saw anything happen like that." From its opening weekend in Seattle, *The Stunt Man* was an overwhelming success. And whether it was thanks to Finley and Dowd's guerrilla marketing blitz or the unconventional story that resonated with local moviegoers who wanted to embrace adventurous filmmaking, one showing after another sold out. And they kept selling out, well into the next year. Hayler, who still books movies at the Seven Gables Theatre in the U District, won't say how much money the movie made at the

Guild 45th, but Finley and Rush claim that it was close to $1 million—and that was in 1980, when tickets were $4 apiece. "I remember this neighbor of mine who went to it based on what I told him about it," former *P-I* film critic William Arnold says. "He was profoundly moved by it. It told him something about life that nothing else ever had. He ended up going back five or six times."

A little over two months into *The Stunt Man*'s test run in Seattle, Twentieth Century-Fox picked up the movie and agreed to distribute it. It earned just north of $7 million nationwide—a box office failure that Rush blames on Fox's refusal to order more than 300 prints—but in February 1981 it was nominated for three Oscars: best adapted screenplay, best actor (Peter O'Toole), and best director. "Seattle audiences really saved that movie," Arnold says. "I'm trying to think of another instance in which another city had that kind of impact, and I can't."

Arnold never lost touch with Rush after their first meeting in Bel Air, and true to his word, he kept lobbying on behalf of the movie right until it premiered. And the director, whom Arnold calls an "amazingly generous, smart, good guy," showed his gratitude for the critic's work by inviting Arnold and his wife, Kathie, to join him at the Academy Awards that spring. "I had better seats than Robert De Niro," Arnold says, sounding a little amazed 30 years later at the string of events that started in Rush's pool house. *The Stunt Man* was shut out at the ceremony, but Rush went home with the moral victory of having seen his picture outlast everyone's expectations but his own. And Arnold? He took home a more tangible trophy, a signed poster that still hangs in his home office: "To Bill and Kathie—Two great gladiators, my best comrades in arms in the battle against tyranny and windmills. Love, -Richard Rush."

Michael Sragow: "Will 'The Stunt Man' survive?" (*Rolling Stone, 1981)*

In the performance that won him the Best Actor award from the National Society of Film Critics, Peter O'Toole, the director-hero of *The Stunt Man*, describes paranoia as a "social disease" that comes from man being constantly screwed by his fellow man. This perception belongs as well to Richard Rush, the real-life producer-director of *The Stunt Man* who spent most of a decade finding the money and developing the techniques he needed to turn Paul Brodeur's arty novel into a unique entertainment — a super-charged, philosophic adventure-comedy. In 1978, he persuaded Mel Simon Productions to finance the script he fashioned with writer Lawrence B. Marcus. Once he made the film, however, he couldn't persuade the corporation that audiences would pay to see it. At that point, Rush a robust six-footer who had been healthy all of his forty-eight years, suffered a heart attack. ("It was a classic case," he told an interviewer. "I lost that round.")

Finally, Mel Simon Productions agreed to a test engagement that began in Seattle on July 27th, 1980. *The Stunt Man* earned rave reviews and did more business in its first week than any film except *The Empire Strikes Back*, but Rush still couldn't get a distribution deal; the studios had decided that Seattle was too esoteric a test market. Nevertheless, he managed to maneuver another test engagement, this one in Los Angeles, the second biggest **movie** market in the country. By the end of its seven-week run at the Westwood, the film had attracted a loyal following, as if it were a thinking man's *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. You could hear the audience anticipate favorite lines or bits of action—no mean feat, considering that this picture plays peekaboo with your perceptions.

Emboldened by its repeated success, Twentieth Century-Fox picked up the film for national release, only to take it to New York two months later with a botched ad campaign. While the press continued to report on *The Stunt Man* as a success story — a dream deferred becomes a dream realized — Fox, faced with disappointing box-office returns, canceled its wide release. But they softened the blow by pledging to rerelease the film on February 20th. And on January 27th, another good omen came when the Directors' Guild of America nominated Rush for Outstanding Directorial Achievement.

The Stunt Man is a bravura piece of moviemaking — a true popular work of modernist art. It makes the audience experience the uncertainty of the contemporary world in a visceral, often hilarious way.

When a fugitive named Cameron (Steve Railsback) accidentally causes the death of a stunt man on location, the director (O'Toole as Eli Cross) talks him into taking the stunt man's place. The looking-glass world of movie-making is a great escape for Cameron (read it: Camera-on), until he suspects that the director would kill him, or anyone, if it would help his film. Rush uses Cameron's paranoia to explore the act of seeing itself: to quote the producer-director, Cameron views his life "as if he were peeking through a keyhole and getting a very partial look at the truth. Like all the rest of us, he makes up his version of the truth as he goes along. He invents enemies to test his strength, and gods to protect him from the enemies."

Talking to Rush is like seeing the movie all over again: he carries the whole thing around in his head. His Bel-Air home could easily be part of the set, since both exude Rush's sense of outlandish fun. The living room, colored like a peacock's tail, is filled with toylike decorations and knickknacks. A carousel horse blocks the way to the bathroom, and you get the feeling that you could flick a switch to set the entire place spinning. A couple of emotional Hungarian dogs lavish their affections on guests.

I met Rush at his home on Inauguration Day, and though he wasn't paying attention to the swearing-in ceremonies, the talk turned to politics anyway. It soon became obvious that, for all of his movie's elaborate gamesmanship, when it comes to The Stunt Man's meanings, Rush wasn't simply foolin' around.

What's happening in the country today doesn't seem very different from what we see around the edges of your film. When the parents of Eli Cross' leading lady (Barbara Hershey) visit the set, they're shocked to see a nude scene. When Cameron, who's a Vietnam vet, uses the word "gooks," Cross says that it has "nostalgia value." You get the feeling that all our social values have fallen into a state of inertia and only art has any energy.

First, I generally agree with Cross when he says, "If you've got something to say in a movie, you'd better slip it in while they're all laughing or crying or jerking off at the sex and violence." But we did try to work the country's sense of lethargy into the texture of the movie. Kent State happened the week that my first "big" movie [*Getting Straight*] opened around the country. Kent State for me was that tragic moment when the people manning the barricades finally said, "Well fuck it." They turned away from political protests toward safer targets. Ecology was born. It was more than fear: parents didn't want to see their children getting killed. When push came to shove, nobody wanted a violent revolution. The braves stopped hunting and stayed home to clean out the tepees. The Movement scattered like buckshot into separate causes. A great sense of indecision, a lack of clear perceptions, settled over us. What better inspiration could there be for a movie meant to jolt people out of an apathetic frame of reference?

I started working on *The Stunt Man* in 1971, but nothing definitive has happened since then to clarify the disorder. The war kind of drifted to an end while Cambodia was still going on. Nixon made the deal with China. With Watergate, we all got used to deception, elbowing one another about it knowingly. Now we've elected to go for a strong-man image, as if that will frighten away all our enemies. We've gone from hippie clothes to designer jeans. The dislocations are tremendously confusing. Everything seems coagulated.

Yet you worked on 'Freebie and the Bean,' a slapstick cop movie, during all this….

Oddly enough, I think the film does fit into what we're talking about, this coagulation. I remember looking at the Mekong Delta on the six o'clock news and thinking, "What a well-done show." Then an action show came on — maybe it was a cop show — and I realized how confused we'd become about violence. I tried to take two terrible bores, have them do horrible things to other people, and yet have them warm and loyal to each other. I thought I could trap an audience into rooting for them and then drawing back.

Sounds like an anti-'Dirty Harry.'

Yeah, Dirty Harry was a straight fascist movie without laughs. I wanted to snap the audience back from Tom and Jerry slapstick to reality and catch them in midchuckle. I wanted a fun-house-mirror look at machismo and violence. In *The Stunt Man*, I wanted a fun-house look at everything.

'The Stunt Man' is partly a Hollywood horror movie. It's about the horror of working in a vacuum, of not knowing what the assumptions of the audience or the studio are. The movie Eli Cross is making could turn out to be 'Heaven's Gate.'

That's what Cross is saying when he tells the anecdote about the friend who made the perfect antiwar movie; when it premièred in his hometown, enlistment went up 600 percent. Terrific uncertainty develops from not knowing how your material will be "read"; the uncertainty develops from the rapid changes in the attitudes of the audience. When the atmosphere shifts, if you're at all conscious of trying to communicate a moral statement, moviemaking becomes an act of desperation. As far as the studios go, though, I've never had any trouble, except for *The Stunt Man*. When I shot *Freebie and the Bean*, Warner Brothers would look at my notes on the action and keep upping the budget. They told me I couldn't stay within budget and shoot those scenes. They were wrong. But I kept staging more stunts to match the extra money.

Even though the film-within-a-film in 'The Stunt Man' is heavily improvised, your own film is intricately structured.

I've never believed in going into the cutting room with a mess of raw footage and then saying, "Let's make a movie." But I do improvise. I learned while making movies like *Hell's Angels on Wheels*, *Psych-Out* and *The Savage Seven*. I had a certain freedom on those so-called exploitation films to get the right tone and reality to the scenes and then catch up with the script. I had my own stock company of actors and technicians, people like Jack Nicholson, Adam Roarke [who plays Eli Cross' leading man] and [cinematographer] Laszlo Kovacs. When Bert Schneider made *Easy Rider*, he was trying to do a "Rush" — he even used my cameraman, Kovacs, and my star, Nicholson.

Although most critics across the country have praised 'The Stunt Man,' some have called your style fragmented, the movie a collection of glittering pieces rather than a whole.

My style isn't fragmented — it's active. Part of it is that I'm trying to match the ideal performance in my head with what I got in the camera. If that means taking a second from an over-the-shoulder shot and trying to match it with a close-up, I'll do it. That's why the movie took so long to edit. I also wanted to jolt the audience's perceptions of not only life but moviemaking itself. That's why I staged certain sleight-of-hand scenes like the on-set movie massacre in abbreviated "movie time." When Cross throws a fit because his assistant has yelled

cut with twenty-two seconds left in the camera, he's absolutely right. That's a fucking lot of time in a movie.

What drew you to the Brodeur novel? It's actually rather precious.

The availability of unspoken metaphor in the middle of an action movie. Here's this fugitive crashing out of the "real" world and into a microcosm ruled by a director playing God or the devil.

Is the director really satanic? He almost uses Cameron's paranoia as a fuel for self-improvement.

Well, I wouldn't call old Eli altruistic. I don't think I'm consciously celebrating art as any kind of panacea for the stunt man's or the world's ills. But it can serve as a necessary buffer to reality. There's great fun in Eli's character — maybe the greatest fun in the movie. Of course, he's the character I'm closest to. Deep down, I don't feel that he's diabolical at all. How could I? Here's a director with three days left on his shooting schedule, struggling to make an antiwar movie work, and finding in this kid the kind of giddy, dangerous madness he needs. On that time schedule, he wouldn't even have been able to send back to Hollywood for a real stunt man. Anybody less than O'Toole wouldn't have been able to pull this character off: this incredibly charming savior and benefactor who then seems to be a killer — until we find out that it's all bullshit.

Was Barbara Hershey's character meant to be a female counterpart to Cross in her effect on the stunt man?

In a study of illusion and reality, what could be more central than the image of the Dream Girl? It's the most absurd concoction of Western civilization; I'm not familiar with Eastern civilization. I remember in kindergarten picking the one girl to fall in love with, that phantom to dream about at night. I've spent most of my life looking around the next corner. Every actress I've known who has become a star is schizophrenic enough to play that role and wrap herself in its mysterious allure. She can make you constantly expect to get to some core, even though all you get is this self-involved creature who's a Southern belle who's also a little girl, depending on what fantasy she shows you on a particular day.

What is she supposed to see in the stunt man, then?

We've all had the experience of seeing a beautiful woman and wondering what to say to her, wasting hours filled with anxiety, and then watching some guy walk up and remark, "Isn't it a pleasant day?" and walk off with her. We've all thought, "What does she see in this asshole?" If that's how you react to the love story here, that's okay with me.

There seemed to be more of a sexual relationship between Cross and Cameron.

There's such an undercurrent of homosexual panic in our society that the slightest suggestion of it adds sinister undertones to O'Toole's part, even though nothing is really going on. I'm trying to toy with the preconceptions the audience brings into the theater with them.

If the movie was so popular in Seattle, L. A. and Canada, why didn't the people come out for it in New York?

Events conspired to lessen the impact of the opening. First, there was the matter of theaters. There were theaters available that in New York signify the arrival of a special film. *The Stunt Man* was not booked into one of those. Then Fox decided to open the film without television promotion. Fox is actually tremendously fond of the film. They picked it up the week it won the Grand Prix at the Montreal Film Festival and probably thought that the momentum would continue to build cross-country. They thought we didn't need TV. I was shocked. When it did go broader and they used TV spots, the grosses in the original two Manhattan theaters doubled. There was also a decision made not to use reviewers' quotes. [A Fox representative contends that this decision was made because New York critics were not as unanimous in their praise as those in Seattle and L. A.] It was said that we couldn't heavily publicize Peter O'Toole, one of the few great actors who's also a great star, because he was thought to be box-office poison. Of course, everyone loved him in the film. Now O'Toole is being considered as the focus of a forthcoming campaign.

The second campaign they used in New York showed the stunt man hanging by a handcuff and smashing through a papiermaché backdrop. The caption was, You'll Believe What You See — And You'll Be Wrong. I guess no one wants to pay four or five bucks to be wrong. At the time, the Fox people in charge of the film went down to Aruba for some convention. Realizing that the ads didn't work and unable to come up with a quick alternative, they simply canceled the ads. The plan became: "Let's wait and see what happens with the Oscar nominations." Now, I'm long past interest in the financial bail-out on the picture. I'm interested in the glory — the vindication, really — not just for me but for all those who worked with me and should know they helped make a hit and not a film that's "unreleasable."

For a long time, the major studios thought that the film could never be sold. Are they trying to prove that they were right?

That's a difficult question to answer.

And what if the studio came to you and said, "The film is just too quick and tricky the way it is; we need more exposition and explanation."

I hope I'd respond as James Joyce did when the people asked him to put back the commas.

Tim Pelan: "The Faustian Fall Guy: Richard Rush's 'The Stunt Man'" (*Cinephilia & Beyond*)

You've got to admire an opening sequence where an unconcerned, lazy dog lies in the middle of a dusty side road, obstructing a Sheriff's patrol car by licking its own balls. The camera pans to a low-flying helicopter overshooting the spot where said lawman will fail to apprehend a fugitive who goes on to become an unofficial stunt man in the chopper occupying director's film. Suddenly, a buzzard (symbolism!) flies into it.

The pilot remarks "That goddamn crazy bird just tried to kill us!" Peter O'Toole, unseen at this point, playing the madly magisterial director Eli Cross, replies, "That's your opinion. Why don't we stop and ask his point of view?" Straight away, clued in also by the ragtime style opening music and clapperboard effect titles, we know we're in for an unconventional ride in director Richard Rush's critically acclaimed cult classic (three Oscar nominations—best director, adapted screenplay, and lead actor for O'Toole), *The Stunt Man*. It was 1980. Rush had previously directed the unconventional proto-buddy cop movie, *Freebie and the Bean* in 1974. He had been a fan of O'Toole for years and couldn't understand why he was being so badly used in movies. He was desperate to land him for the role of the director in his upcoming adaptation of the 1970 novel by Paul Brodeur. Scripted by Rush and Lawrence B. Marcus, *The Stunt Man* tells the tale of fugitive Vietnam vet Cameron (Steve Railsback) who stumbles upon a World War One action film, accidentally causing the death of a stunt performer. Cross agrees to hide and disguise him on the production if he takes the fellow's place, using his hold over him to push him into ever more dangerous escapades, turning art into a deadly game for the sake of his own ego. To land his favorite actor, Rush got himself invited to the same Hollywood party he knew O'Toole was attending. They chatted a long while, but nerves got the better of him and he failed to bring up the screenplay—"When he walked out the door I remember saying to myself, 'You chicken shit bastard, why the hell didn't you mention it?'" Luckily, someone who was there with O'Toole mentioned that Cross had made *Freebie and the Bean*. O'Toole dashed back in, pumping Cross' hand. "I'm crazy about that picture." The screenplay was duly delivered, absorbed and agreed to. "I'm a literate and intelligent man," O'Toole told Cross, "and unless you let me do your film I will kill you."

As Eli manipulates Cameron into his scheme, they seem to appear behind a wall of gauze, actually a reflection as they enter the doors of the hotel around which the shoot is based. Stopping on the threshold, Eli tells the young Turk, "That door is the looking glass, and inside is wonderland." To the neophyte stuntman (and the audience), the line between artifice and reality is about to become ever more blurred. Rush conceived *The Stunt Man* as a picture that reveals "the panic and paranoia over controlling our own destinies." He saw the central characters as sane in a world gone mad. Cameron comes to believe Eli intends to capture his own death on camera. He also becomes infatuated with the lead actress Nina Franklin (Barbara Hershey, who may or may not be manipulating him and is in turn manipulated by Cross—he "accidentally" slips her nude scene into dailies viewed by her visiting parents, telling her this later to effect the desired reaction in an emotional scene). Columbia rejected the first draft (it was eventually made independently and distributed by 20th Century Fox)—"They couldn't figure out if it was a comedy, a drama, if it was a social satire, if it was an action adventure… and, of course, the answer was, 'Yes, it's all those things.' But that isn't a satisfactory answer to a studio executive."

"How tall was King Kong?" Eli constantly volleys to the exasperated Cameron. "Three feet," comes the reply. All is illusion in their world—there is no way such an elaborate multi-camera stunt sequence as Cameron's headlong chase across rooftops would be shot in one take, as we see in the film. Especially with Cameron seemingly winging it. We see him showered with glass, reacting as if genuinely injured, and butted in the face by a rifle, bruising and scarring his cheek. The stunt coordinator later peels the special makeup off his face. O'Toole's Eli meanwhile zooms about in a chopper, or his aerial rig, like a God, lording it over the ants below. Before Cameron even joins the crew, he and a crowd of onlookers watch a major action sequence as a bi-plane strafes a beachhead of German soldiers, explosions, and bullets tearing the place up. When the smoke clears, we see the soldiers torn apart, and the spectators gasp, only for the stuntmen to get up, revealing their legs aren't bloodily torn apart, but in fact buried beneath the sand, for example. Rush negates the extensive prep work involved, not explaining that surely the onlookers would have been privy to that. Instead, he shows their shock and relief at the reveal. A massive cheat, but he doesn't care. Why? Because we are Cameron, happening upon something strangely surreal and unfamiliar, yet harking back to traumatic memories long buried of his own service in Vietnam. Late in the third act, he has a kind of emotional breakdown with Hershey's character in a store room, revealing the truth behind why he's on the run—a war buddy had promised him a job in his store, but said things were too slack. In reality, Cameron discovers he's been "banging my old lady." As he relives his rage (he accidentally injured an intervening cop), the imagined ice cream tubs and crates of the store are replaced by paint pots he flings about in their remembered place, an off the wall precursor to John Rambo's breakdown in *First Blood* two years later.

With regard to the lengthy development time for the picture, Rush declared, "I must be five years ahead of my time because that's how long it takes a studio to say 'Yes' to one of my projects." The director learned from the ground up as a recording engineer and a still photographer, graduating to

directing films for his own company. Critics during his more prolific '60's phase dubbed him "the first American new wave director." A compliment Rush no doubt relished, especially after Columbia had tried unsuccessfully to woo Arthur Penn and François Truffaut to direct *The Stunt Man*.

The ragtime-like theme music mentioned earlier was not the only element to the film's admittedly minimalist score by Dominic Frontiere, for which he won a Golden Globe. One of the main themes, "The Chase," features as both a fast tempo instrumental, used during virtuoso stunt sequences, and a slow-burning torch song by Dusty Springfield, retitled "Bits and Pieces." The Norman Gimbel lyrics are suffused with heavy wordplay, reflecting the young protagonist's confused state of mind. The singer breaths, in that unique, dusky voice of hers:

And you watch and wonder where you belong
And the crowd, it moves and takes you along
And the colors splash and repaint your sky
And reality is yours to deny
And you look for someone your arms can hold
Who will let you tell what begs to be told
Then you ask yourself what good are your dreams?
In a world where nothing is what it seems

The song was good enough to deserve an Oscar nomination (which it sadly didn't get), cleverly reflecting the mood of the film itself, not a mere add-on like so many movie songs have become. It is perhaps a little too redolent of the classic "Windmills of Your Mind."

By the late 1970's, O'Toole was commercial anathema and Rush faced an uphill battle convincing the suits that he was right for the part of his egotistical director. "There was no chance of yielding on my part. Once O'Toole said yes, the picture had to go with him as far as I was concerned." O'Toole's difficult hellraising reputation he brushed aside. "Peter had a deified position in my mind that placed him above all those trivialities. As it turned out, he was an absolute dream to work with. It was like having a Stradivarius to play that was quite willing to be played."

Opinions differ as to whether O'Toole based his portrayal on his old mentor David Lean, or Rush himself. O'Toole told David Itzkoff for Artsbeat that "for me, a person, a character, a part is on the page. I don't invent, I don't copy anybody or think of anybody. Something happens, and I can't explain it. I've tried to write about it. How the ink from the page comes up into my eyes and forms itself into a part that I want to play, and I've no idea how it happens. Intellectually, I can understand that I read it and enjoy it. But why this particular one, I don't know." On whether he was channeling David Lean, say: "'That's Orson Welles?' 'That's John Huston?' No, no, no. It's Eli Cross. He lives for me. I don't want to be anybody else, thank you very much. He's not copying anybody. He's himself." The veteran actor stated he would give short shrift to any director who tried to manipulate him the way Eli Cross does with his cast, crew, and naive protege: "Anybody who would do that to me would get a punch in the head. No, nobody ever bothers me with that. I can't tolerate it. Oh yes, some people have tried, and they've had their reward. From then on, I don't speak a word to them. From me, you get a mild expression of disgust, and then I walk off and have a beer."

O'Toole was careful to get his costume exactly right, and every morning he'd come to Rush with suggestions. Rush recalls, "One day Peter came to me and said 'How's this?' and I said, 'That's it, that's exactly the look I've been after, the Americanization of Peter O'Toole.' And I didn't realise that he was dressed exactly as I was (including his viewfinder suspended around his neck) and it wasn't until noon that day that I finally figured it out. The rest of the crew were aware of it and it caused some amusement."

Rush was certainly as driven as his fictional counterpart Eli. During the filming of the massive stunt around the Hotel del Coronado, permission was denied for the bi-plane to fly above the location. His stunt coordinator Chuck Bail flew the plane, supposed to go on and land at a nearby naval base. Instead, he developed "radio trouble" and lost contact with the closest control tower, conveniently over the hotel. At this point Bail then performed a handful of dives and strafing runs while Rush filmed him with five pre-prepared strategically located cameras.

After all the trouble Rush had getting funding to actually make the film, it suffered from an extremely limited domestic release and was effectively buried—the studio had no idea how to market it. In O'Toole's opinion, the film wasn't released, "It escaped." "It didn't fit into the wrapper that the distributors had prepared that they send their hamburgers out in," Rush sniffed. Most critics found much to admire, however, and it enjoyed a second life on television screenings. That most hard-to-please doyen of cinema Pauline Kael raved that it was, "A virtuoso piece of kinetic moviemaking. Working with material that could, with a few false steps, have turned into a toney reality-and-illusion puzzle, the director, Richard Rush, has kept it all rowdy and funny—it's slapstick metaphysics. Peter O'Toole is the flamboyant, fire-eater director who the stunt man thinks is out to kill him. Playing a protean figure—visionary, fierce-tempered, and ornery, yet ethereal and fey, O'Toole gives a peerless comic performance."

The poster for the film depicted a devil figure sitting on a director's chair behind the camera. The dwarf-like figure was reimagined to an O'Toole-esque lean silhouette. The actor

took one look at the long forked tail thrusting forward between its legs and quipped to Rush, "How did you know?"

ONLY THREE MORE IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS, FALL 2020, SERIES 41:

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Dec 1: Charlie Chaplin, *The Great Dictator* (1940)

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