

## caveat

- Don't buy this book if the price leaves you without enough for a frappuccino at Starbucks.
- Don't buy this book to discover who slept with whom, who beat up his lover, or other tidbits of vicarious gossip.
- Don't buy this book expecting to discover the secret of finding an agent, selling a screenplay, or landing a starring role in the next Quentin Tarantino flick.
- DO buy this book because you think it might provide fresh insight into survival in a wonderful but crazy industry, because you enjoy finding out about how someone else made it, and because it looks like it might be a good read.

Something about me: first, the title. That's a bit of a humbug; I did make a nickel. I went from starvation wages in 1956 to more than \$1000 a week for most of 1974.<sup>1</sup> But it didn't last; there were also long dry spells, with paychecks as scarce as wombats in Wal-Mart. During the lean years I lugged water heaters around the stockroom of a swimming pool supply company, snoozed through insulting pitches about how any red-blooded American boy could get rich in

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<sup>1</sup> \$1000 a week in 1974 might be the equivalent of \$6000 in today's dollars.

vacuum cleaner sales, and borrowed my way into outlandish debt with a friendly credit union. Most of you have never heard of me. But I've had my fifteen minutes in the sun, been involved in three features, and have churned out more than a hundred short films, writing, directing and raising the money for most of them. And I've relished almost every moment. On balance, it's been a great life.

Scattered throughout the book you'll find several well-known names. I've had an encounter with each one. Some, a mere handshake or a quick hello. Others I knew well. But mainly I try to bring them in when my association related to a project I was involved in.

Names aside, I think you'll like the book. For those curious about the odd and famous, it's filled with enough filmic foolishness to keep you turning pages. There's a pinch of sex, along with a smidgen of politics, and a bit about the tribulations of family. All part of the great carnival of life. On the other hand, if non-stop libido, larceny, and nose powder are your turnings read no further; go pilfer a copy of Julia Phillips' wonderfully glib, rarely insightful, and ultimately sad disgourgarama of Hollywood angst and nastiness, *You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again* (1991).

Metaphorically, yearning to work in film can make you feel like you're on a carousel; every time your horse comes around and you reach out to snatch the brass ring, it eludes you. And you boil over with jealousy when the guy or gal ahead of you grabs it. In Hollywood, tens of thousands lust for the brass ring. Most eventually end up selling insurance, painting sets for junior college theatricals, get into software to earn their BMWs or become pastry chefs. Nothing wrong with that, the world can always use a superior lemon chiffon pie.

Still, as with any art form, good movie making takes dedication and persistence and above all an immense passion. Mastering the skills that result in lasting or memorable work involves time and patience. Creativity is a stern mistress and the apprenticeship can be long and frustrating. Though even if you fall on your face you still stand a chance of slipping into a quirky kind of fame. Witness Ed Wood, and *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959).<sup>2</sup>

Movies, music, sports, publishing, television, and politics: these are the romantic magnets of our day. And they are enormously influential. The stars, singers, sluggers, authors, producers and senators who populate these arenas are held up as icons, glittering examples of the success we should all struggle to emulate. Some earn megabucks. By comparison, most teachers, who play a vastly more important role in molding the character of our future citizens, are penniless beggars. We're encouraged to believe that a new SUV, a bulging wallet, Paris Hilton on one arm, or waking up next to Ben Affleck is a truer measure of greatness than is a steady competence, the smile of a handicapped kid we've helped complete some task, seeing to it that a lonely elder has someone to talk to, or simply being a decent human being.

Sure, altruism is rewarded; we get a minute and a half of it every three days on News at Eleven. But stack that up against "Who Wants to be a Millionaire," and what have you got? Like constantly reaching for the brass ring, too many fall for the media hype. And I don't mean to put down sweating hard to catch the ring. But instead of giving up, maybe those who are never likely to catch it need to measure success in a different way.

That's why I wrote this book. By reading about how I managed to survive forty years inside a rarely profitable, sometimes maddening, but often deliciously rewarding profession, I

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<sup>2</sup> Often considered the worst director of all time, Edward D. Wood Jr.'s career has been celebrated in the wonderful, loosely fictionalized biopic, *Ed Wood* (1994), starring Johnny Depp, and directed by Tim Burton.

hope you'll learn to recognize success in the way I've come to: by enjoying the *process*. Once you can do that, even if you're never able to send your daughter to Harvard or watch a neighbor's jaw drop when he spots the glitzy new Mercedes in your drive, you've won.

## a word to wannabes

*Reeling Through Hollywood* was also written with you in mind. All you brave souls who keep trying to wedge your way into the movie business, especially those of you who've had your ass bitten more times than you can count. You're the folks who mortgaged your Toyotas, Grandma's cameo collection (with her permission, I hope), or your bungalow in Wahpeton, North Dakota, to finance your first film. Maybe your girlfriend has dumped you for a guy who pulls in six figures at Microsoft while you deliver pizzas or sizzle fries at McDonalds, then pop No-Doze until 4 a.m. as you sweat over your new high concept screenplay. Or your boyfriend is pissed because you slog through fourteen-hour days as a free production assistant on *Revenge of the Zombie Dentists*, when you could be home wrestling up a nouvelle chicken Provençale and giving him a full body massage. Even your cat has run off because the leftovers from that sixty-five-cent canned tuna at Safeway don't cut it.

Still, you hound Aunt Trudy and Uncle Mort for a loan so you can buy one more roll of film, or you bus dishes for the Beautiful People at Ma Maison so you can chunk down \$250 bucks for the next fabulous conference where the inside dope on how to break into the biz will be revealed. And why do you do it? For love, of course, like Diana Morales in *A Chorus Line*. That's why I did it. That's why we all do it. We have to. We're following a dream.

The movie business is risky and unforgiving. Today's super giant is often tomorrow's white dwarf. Negotiating the yellow-brick road on the way to the Emerald City may not be as

treacherous for you as it was for Dorothy, but neither is anyone likely to strew rose petals in your path.

I wrote the book with all this in mind, confident that reading about my sometimes-disjointed journey will help you avoid the dead ends I often ran into along the way. Help you focus more clearly, recognize real opportunities when they're presented and convince you to develop both short term and long term goals, so that whatever it is you seek as a creative person won't dribble down the lack-of-foresight drain. While no "how to" manual, my book will prove, I hope, a cautionary tale. Perhaps you'll discover films, events and personalities you've not previously known about. Maybe the opinionated comments I toss in now and then will move you to look at things a bit differently than you did before. Most of all, I hope that understanding my experience helps you to chart a more rewarding and thoughtful journey of your own. And as you move ahead with your own career, maybe you'll feel inspired to pass on what you learn along the way to the next generation.

But no matter how many times I tell you how difficult it is to succeed in film, you're probably not going to listen. I don't blame you. Like me, you've got to follow the dream. But what if you don't get there? What if, in spite of working your ass off, you don't "make it" on Hollywood's terms? What if your name never pops up next to Nicholas Cage or Nora Ephron in *People*? If so, will you decide that you're to blame? Will you spend long unhappy years trying to figure out why? Will you allow into your consciousness that tiny pipsqueak voice, the one our society so often uses to put people down, the one that says "loser?"

Don't do it. Don't fall for that mind set. Don't be a slave to your pride, or make the business into some kind of a god. But do go for the dream.

If your film career brings you riches and fame, more power to you. But be realistic. Understand that in spite of all your hard work, there's no guarantee. "Making it" is sometimes just plain dumb luck, like being in the right place at the right time. Also, be thankful that the odds against making it big are not as unlikely as winning the lottery. Know that there's a shiny side to the coin. You *can* make films. You can even make decent ones. And with immense determination you might even make a living at it, as I did. (Most of the time.)

Mainly, focus on the process. Enjoy the writing of your screenplay, trying out for the role, raising the money to make your film. In the movie business your name on the screen before the main title can be a kind of pink smoke that dissolves as soon as the crowds you were sure would break box office records stay away in droves. Remember, to put food in your belly or keep little Charlie in diapers, you can always deliver pizza or wait tables. (Hey, these are honorable ways to make a living. And you never know, you may be able to parlay that experience into a terrific screenplay!) But if you finally decide, "Screw Hollywood, I'm going back to Oshkosh" to become the greatest lemon-chiffon pie-maker in the world, please zip me an e-mail. Lemon-chiffon is my favorite.

Still, if you're determined to help create movies, know that as you learn to dodge the hot oil being poured down over you by the gatekeepers of Fortress Hollywood, you've mainly got to figure out how to appreciate the process of doing. And that simply means being a creative person. By learning to appreciate the process you'll be nourishing your creative soul. That's my message.

