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A Conversation With Alan Parker

Alan Parker

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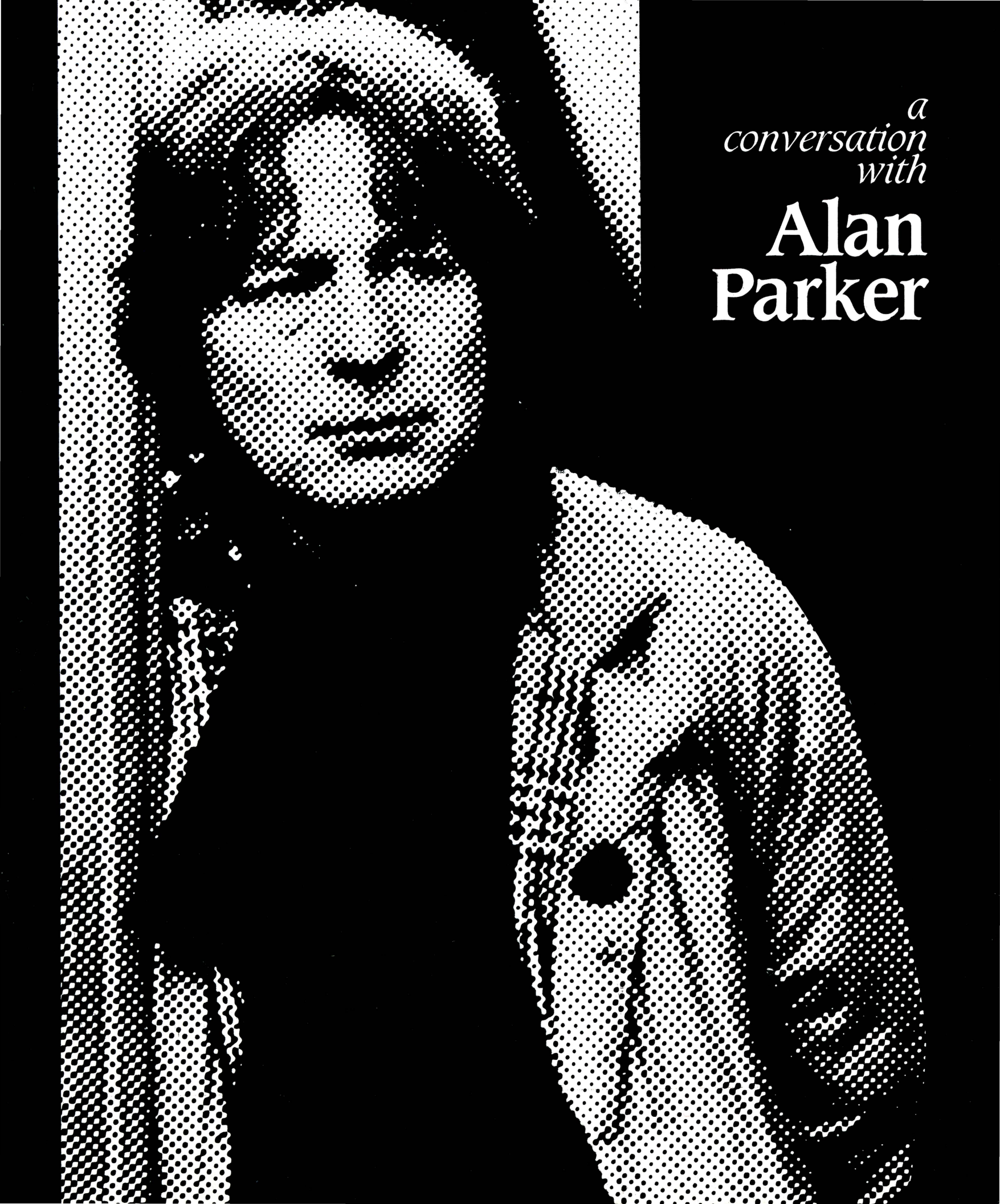


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*a
conversation
with*
**Alan
Parker**

moderated
by

Anthony
Loeb
Chairman
Department
of
Film
&
Video

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**Anthony
Loeb:**

It's my real pleasure and honor to welcome Alan Parker. It happens that he was here on another occasion, having to do with the Chicago International Film Festival, and we managed to corner him and ask him to come back and he said "yes" which was quite generous. Thank you, Alan. So to begin with an anecdote, Alan told me he was in Berlin recently and he lost his temper during the press conference.

**Alan
Parker:**

Uh-huh.

Tony:

Tell us what provoked you.

Alan:

Well, it was very minor. It was in Germany so they didn't get the first three jokes and from then on I knew I was in trouble. A press conference is a strange thing for a filmmaker because it was really invented for politicians as their primary access to the press. I prefer to talk to the press individually anyway. People at those press conferences aren't asking you questions, they're making statements. After about eight different statements which I kept nodding and agreeing with, it became very irritating. But if you take it seriously, you're dead. You have to treat it lightly because you're automatically on the defensive with people bombarding you with difficult questions which are not really relevant to your films. My last film, *Mississippi Burning*, is a difficult film, and I'm in a strange position in that I am not an American and yet I make American films. There's a lot of anti-American feeling in Europe and I've had enough of it really because there's a great deal of snobbery and intellectual pretention over there and yet they can't sustain a viable film industry of their own. But basically, I broke my own cardinal rule for such occasions which is never to lose my sense of humor. Consequently, I played into the hands of the festival press people and it became too combative to be pleasurable.

Tony:

What is the most difficult question about *Mississippi Burning*? When I went into the film, despite the fact that it is fiction, I felt that I was seeing a reality that was compelling. I don't know what you know, but I can understand why we are uneasy. As a filmmaker, what is the crux of the issue that is uncomfortable for people?

Alan:

Well, in a way it's my own fault because it's a polemical film which is very rare in American cinema. The reason that we did it was to provoke argument and debate about not just a particular period in history, but about racism. Most of the criticisms and arguments that are being talked about are articulated in the film anyway, and in order for people to speak up about these issues, they often attack the film itself. I think the big problem for me was that, before I even began it, everybody said this was one of the most precious moments in American history, particularly Black American history. It's a quagmire from the point of view



*MISSISSIPPI
BURNING* Alan
Ward (WILLEM
DAFOE)

of never ever being able to please everybody even though it was quite clear that my heart was in the right place. The two criticisms that have been raised a million times—what is the difference between fact and fiction and why is the story not told from a Black point of view—are crucial issues which can be argued for and against. *Mississippi Burning* is a difficult film, but as I look back on it, I don't know that I would have made it any differently if I'd have known what I know now. It's just too important and complex a subject for one film ever to be able to get it all right. Maybe I didn't get it right, but my hope was that if it had been embraced by many different political groups, which it hasn't been, it would have allowed 20 more films to be made. I think the greatest tragedy is that the controversy may mean that no more films will be made on this subject because Hollywood is very, very conservative and hates controversy. The film itself has done well at the box office and artistically it's been successful from the point of view of Academy Award nominations, but it was meant to do more. Last night someone asked me my chances of winning the Oscar with this film and I said I had about as much chance as Frank Bruno beating Mike Tyson.

Tony: Hollywood is also very guilty. They may feel that they have to reward you.

Alan: Yeah, I hope you're right, but I don't think you are.

Tony: How has the film changed you? You went to Mississippi. There was an abstraction in writing

*MISSISSIPPI
BURNING* Front
to Back: the
Choctaw man
(BARRY DAVIS
JIM Sr.), Alan
Ward (WILLEM
DAFOE), Agent
Bird (KEVIN
DUNN), and
Rupert
Anderson
(GENE
HACKMAN)



the script and you wrote the script. Then you experience reality on location and you begin to interpret it and I assume you grow in the process.

Alan:

Yes, I learned a lot. I learned how inadequate film is. You know, film can't change the world—not that I intended to change the world with one film—and you quickly realize that the problems of life are infinitely more important than the film medium. The tragedy is that because so few films are made with any kind of social sensibility, when you do make them, too much is expected of them. This is especially true within American cinema which from a capitalistic point of view is obviously about audience reaction and monetary reward. To actually slip a film like this into that system is an enormous risk and consequently carries a disproportionate amount of responsibility.

Tony:

What makes such a film so difficult to make?

Alan:

American cinema has invented a language of cinema which the whole world understands. It's the only cinema that completely dominates world audiences because it's the cinema of the audience, not the cinema of the filmmaker. The decisions that are made within most American films have nothing to do with a filmmaker's beliefs or point of view, and everything to do with how an audience will respond. Those are the decisions that are always made and

they create a particular kind of cinema which is criticized in Europe, where we have a lot to say but don't know how to say it. Within the American system, some very important things about the world in which we live are not normally seen. Some films do squeeze through but, in the main, most films are not about the world in which we live. They're about the creation of a fantasy world that exists only within a movie theater where, for a moment in time, you go in and enjoy it for two hours and when you leave, the moment is lost. You've enjoyed the experience at a superficial level and it won't actually affect the life that you're leading, you know? It won't be serious like this all night. I promise.

Tony: How was Gene Hackman to work with?

Alan: Very good. Excellent. He made my life very easy. I never had the opportunity to work with Spencer Tracy or Humphrey Bogart and I think it would be very similar. He has a directorial brain and can cut right through to the heart of a scene. The choices he makes are very rapid and he requires very little conversation with his director. Warren Beatty told me before I started that Gene is the finest American movie actor and I think I would agree with him. I don't think I shot a single take on him that wasn't perfect.

Tony: I want to tell you that Alan really blows my mind. He's got this gentle quality, but he's steel underneath. Tell us the story about how Hackman reserved his privacy. I think it's interesting

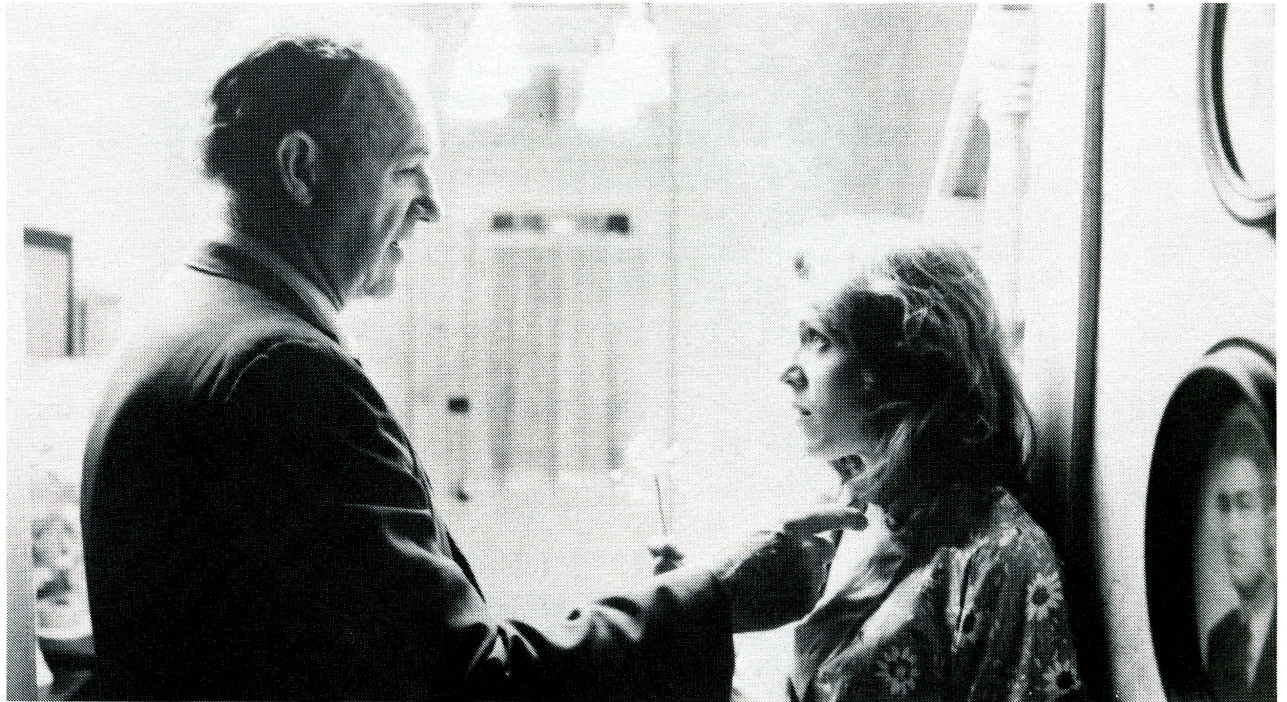
*MISSISSIPPI
BURNING* Frank
Bailey (MICHAEL
ROOKER) and
Rupert Anderson
(GENE
HACKMAN)



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and it leads us into the collaborative aspect of film.

- Alan:** Well, my creative collaboration with Gene was as comfortable and as happy as any relationship I've had with an actor, but he distanced himself. Today someone showed me a newspaper that said I would be catching up with Gene here in Chicago. Well, there's no way that I would see him because, first of all, he's making a film and secondly, we didn't socialize. In three months we didn't go out to dinner because he's a very private man. He works on the set as professionally as possible and does not want to be the director's best pal. That's how he works. He does a lot of films and that's how he retains his own sense of who he is so that he doesn't mix the day's work and what happens in the evening.
- Tony:** In looking at your films I noticed that you work again and again with the same people—cinematographers, gaffers, casting people, etc. Can you speak about that? You're obviously creating an intimate assemblage that provides continuity for your films.
- Alan:** The strange thing is I never worked with the same actor or actress twice and yet the crew basically remains the same. I think they're the very best at what they do. We have a language that becomes minimal after a number of years and so it makes things easier. If you are away for three months in a motel in the middle of Mississippi, you want to be making films with people that you not only respect, but who are also your friends. Because of that I am very guarded about the auteur theory. Film is collaborative, totally collaborative, and if your crew members are your friends, you're more likely to listen to them. Or at least I am. There's something about the continuity of the people around me that makes me feel secure and strong.
- Tony:** How do you establish a scene? Let's talk about the scene in *Mississippi Burning* when Hackman goes to the house and the sheriff's wife provides key information. It troubled me a little bit.
- Alan:** You're going to be difficult now, but after Berlin it's easy.
- Tony:** How do you work with the cameraman? Are you telling him exactly what you want? How does the process work for you when you begin to decide how to approach a scene? Is this done by you alone or are decisions deferred until you experience the moment of photography?
- Alan:** Well, it differs from scene to scene. In that particular scene, I shot it exactly as I wrote it. The way in which it was choreographed followed the thought within it. In other words, you can't impose something on it that doesn't come out of it organically. It's pretty simple really. She comes into the beauty parlor and needs to pull away from him and go to the backroom for a very private moment when she reveals the pivotal information. The way in which it's



*MISSISSIPPI
BURNING*
Rupert
Anderson
(*GENE
HACKMAN*) and
Mrs. Pell
(*FRANCES
McDORMAND*)

constructed is that she is in the foreground and then, when Gene walks up to her and touches her on the shoulder, she walks into the backroom. Instantly there is some distancing and the important information, which one naturally would go in close to hear, becomes more powerful because you hold the wide shot instead of moving in closer.

Tony: Why is that?

Alan: It's just the opposite of what you would imagine. If you've got complete concentration within a scene, walking away is sometimes more powerful than doing the tight shot which is expected. By the time that scene occurs in *Mississippi Burning*, Frances McDormand has already delivered the important speech about racism. She says that racism is something that gets taught, not something you're born with—you live it, you breathe it, you marry it—after which Gene touches her on the shoulder and she moves away. Sometimes you can turn your back on a moment and heighten its tension. Bad actors only want to find the camera and hate to turn their back, but really good actors love to do it.

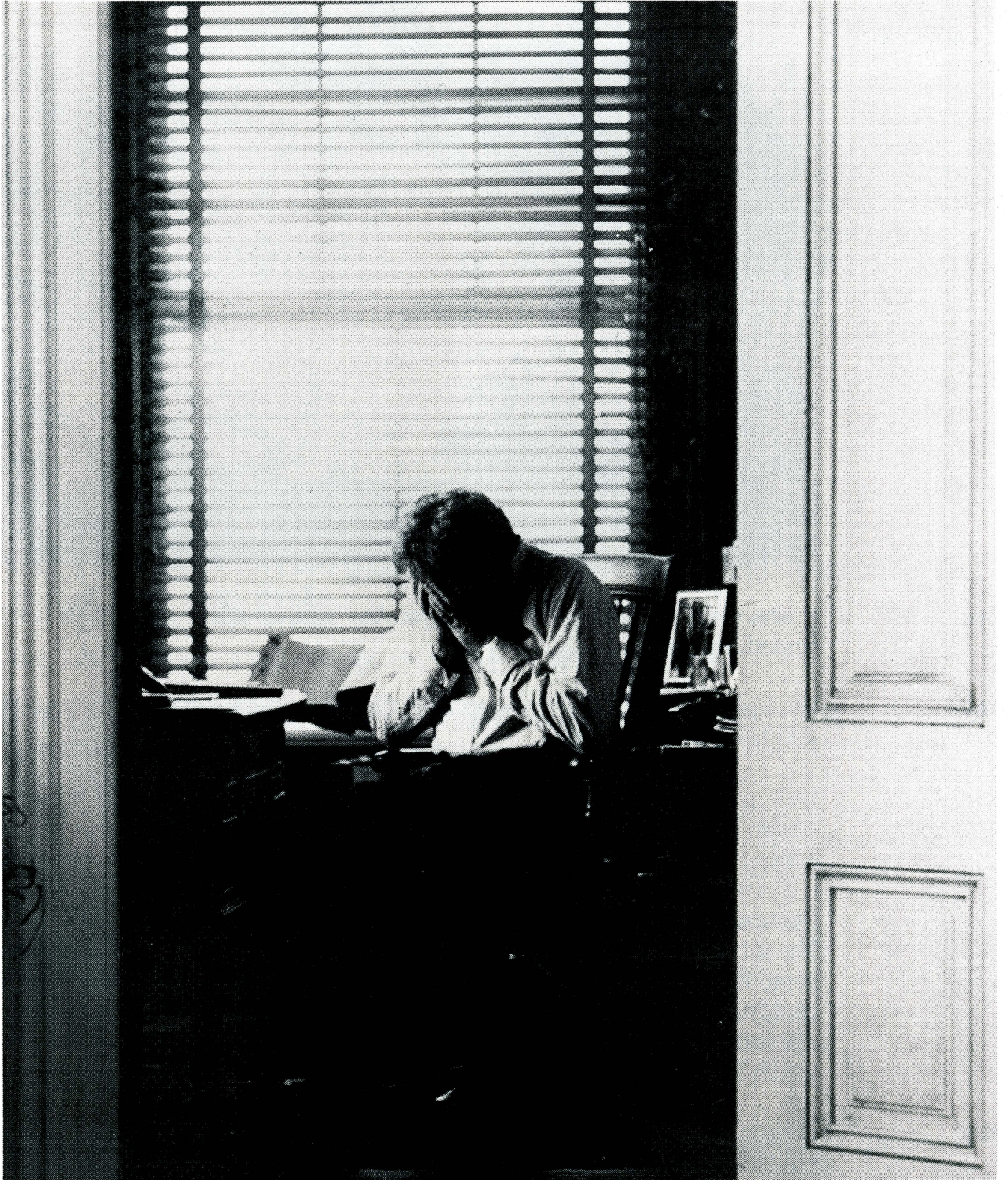
Tony: You're increasing the anticipation.

Alan: Only if you're emotionally connected to the characters. If the audience is not with them, the moment will be lost.

- Tony:** I find the opening of *Shoot the Moon*, which you made with Albert Finney and Diane Keaton, specific in a way that defines character and creates an empathy that is very moving. Was the opening moment easy to find? The man crying, the pain, the crisis that is implied in contrast to the seemingly beautiful, ordered, bucolic surroundings of his house. I watched this man break down in pain in the opening and I cried with him.
- Alan:** Well, it does break the rule in that these opening moments should be at the end of Act Two. Actually what I've done is begin with a climax. It's the first thing you see apart from the inanimate images of tiny fragments from their lives. To suddenly cut from the children's toys and exteriors of the house to the heart of the problem in the very first scene was an experiment. It's not a natural thing to do, but it completely involves you from the moment the film starts. From that moment on, you already know what's wrong with this family and the pain that man is going through. As I said, normally it's a scene that would need twenty scenes to explain. But because you haven't explained it, you're immediately allowed inside the conflict in their lives. The very first thing I wrote many years ago was a film called *Melody*—which no one ever saw, thank goodness—and after twenty minutes of the most boring film you've ever seen in your life, the little girl in the film buys a goldfish. From then on, the film is pretty good, and I began to think that the most important thing is to get to the "goldfish" pretty quick in a film. *Mississippi Burning* has a very dramatic opening that reveals the reason for the entire film. I always feel that you present the film's credentials and your own credentials as a filmmaker in those moments. An audience makes a judgment very quickly.
- Tony:** How hard was it to find such a pointed and revealing moment in *Shoot the Moon*?
- Alan:** Bo Goldman is a wonderful screenwriter who won Academy Awards for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Melvin and Howard*. He had an original story called *Switching* about a man and the breakup of a family and a marriage. It became one of the most personal of all my films and I suppose I identified with it because the relationship and the family situation are almost identical to my own. I worked with Bo, locked away in a room, and we became like each other's therapist. Every line of dialogue reflects something that happened to either him or me. Sometimes you do films about other people's lives and sometimes you do them about your own. When I did *Mississippi Burning*—"Midnight Burning" I always call it—it was not a world I knew firsthand. I had to learn about it, do research. *Shoot the Moon* was something that you could go home to every night and there wasn't anything said on the set that I hadn't heard sometime in my own life. *Shoot the Moon* was a strange exorcism of my own spirit, and I think in that respect it's different from all of my other films.
- Tony:** How old were you at the time you made it?

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*SHOOT THE
MOON George
Dunlap
(ALBERT
FINNEY)*



*SHOOT THE
MOON* George
Dunlap
(ALBERT
FINNEY) and
Faith Dunlap
(DIANE
KEATON)



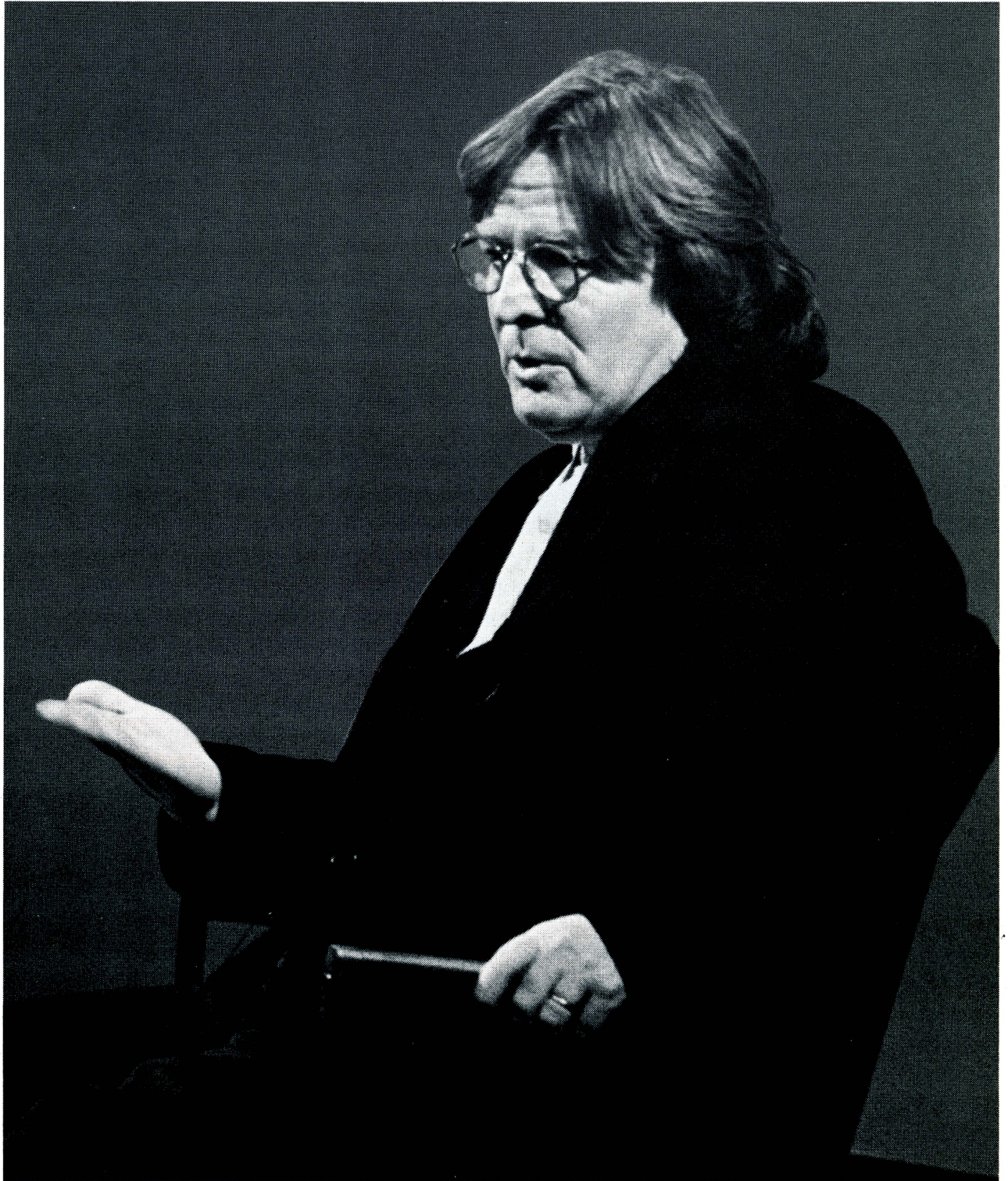
- Alan:** It was made in 1981 and I'm 45 now. Any mathematicians here? 36 is it? Yeah, 36, 37, something like that.
- Tony:** What about Albert Finney who enacted this extraordinary moment for you? How much did you have to direct him?
- Alan:** Well, it's very interesting that you should say that because Albert is a theatrically trained British actor. Maybe it would help to explain the difference between the acting styles of Albert Finney and Diane Keaton, who is the quintessential American movie actress. Albert is classically trained to rehearse until he finds the moment and then to repeat for the camera. Diane is technically quite immaculate although she will never ever do the same thing twice. The mixture of those two styles was actually quite difficult at times. A couple of scenes demonstrate that and you may have chosen one of them. She had to cry as well and she could not fake it. She would not fake it. She would not do it unless the moment called upon real pain and real tears. What you get from him is theater, a moment of "craft." When you watch her cry, it's totally real.
- Tony:** Do you help her find the emotional memory or does she go away and find the impulse privately?

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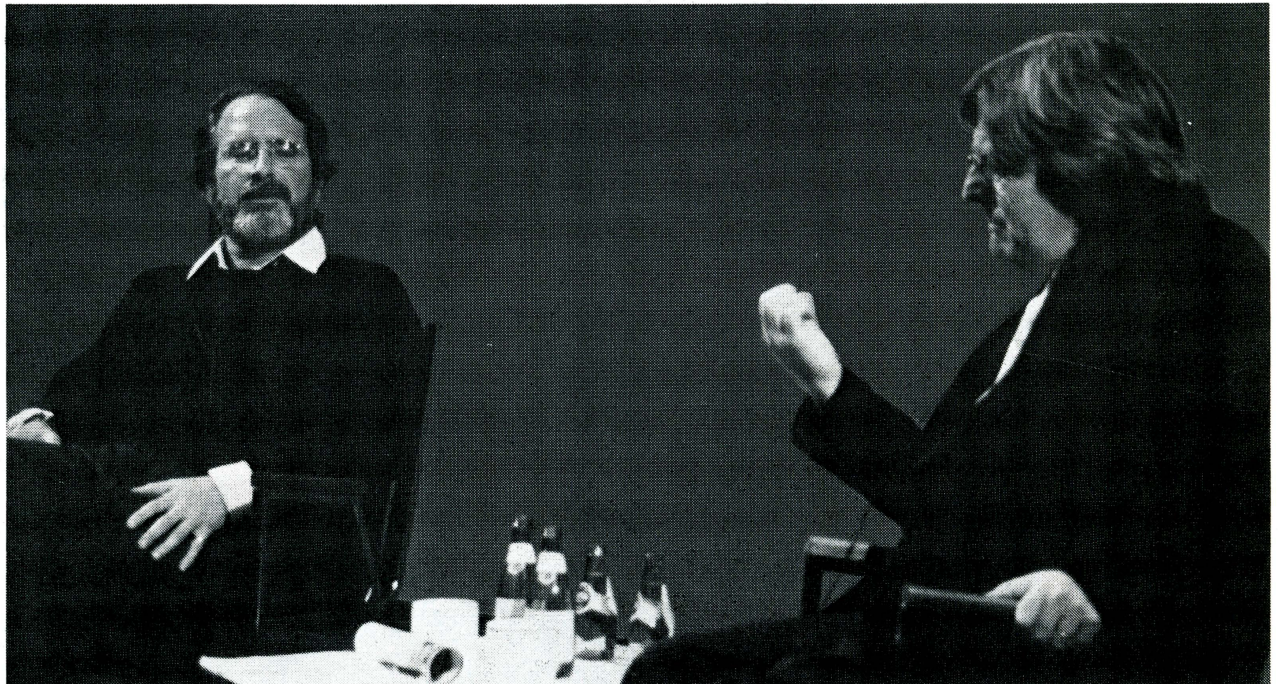
- Alan:** The basic technique of most contemporary actors and actresses is that they find their inspiration from within themselves. Sometimes Diane required moments on her own in a corner of the set. We would respect her in complete silence knowing that she was trying to find something that reminded her of a personal moment that would enable her to cry naturally. I don't know if it's the same for all of you, but sometimes you may be reminded of difficult moments in your own life. God, this sounds like the opening of *Fame*, doesn't it? Sometimes you can feel it when you see a photograph or hear a piece of music and think of an old love affair. It was hard for Diane at times, but she used music. She had a tape by the Eagles, I think, called "Hotel California" which she played on a Sony Walkman. You know, we all need what we need and the tears just came. On the other hand, Albert had a more pragmatic approach. He would simply say, "If you can't feel it, fake it."
- Tony:** OK, maestro, talk about a painful moment from your life.
- Alan:** From my life?
- Tony:** Yeah.
- Alan:** God, it is like *Fame*, isn't it? I think we already did. You know, regarding the Berlin Film Festival. That's pretty painful.
- Tony:** Can you talk about a painful moment with your father?
- Alan:** With my father? Oh, Jesus....It's funny actually because the French, who asked me all these questions about being an artist, asked what my father did for a living. This is an answer to your question, but without you actually getting away with what you think you're getting away with. Anyway, I said to them, "Well, he was a painter actually," and they said, "Oh, really? Neo-realist or impressionist?" and I said, "Well, he was sort of avant-garde—he only painted in one color," and they said, "Really? Fantastique!", and I said, "He only worked in gray because he painted transformers for the electricity board."
- Tony:** That's really funny. Can we take some questions from our audience?
- Question:** I'm English, too, and I'm always...
- Alan:** Never mind.
- Question:** We can go beyond it. What do you feel you bring from the English caste system? Whenever one talks about English novels or filmmakers, there's an underlying tension about where

one belongs in the class system. I wonder what the class system has done to you and how you use the anger and resentment it creates in the work you do.

- Alan:** Well, I think you're absolutely right. I think that some of my films are extraordinarily angry, much angrier than I ever imagined. When I saw the final cut of *Pink Floyd: The Wall* I couldn't believe it. It was like a scream from beginning to end. A lot of the anger in my work—even *Mississippi Burning*, although for a different reason—comes from growing up at the bottom end of a very rigid class system and being told that you could not move out of that. The immovable underclass is obviously something I particularly identified with from the point of view of being Black in Mississippi, and one of the reasons I'm not keen to work in England. I find it so incredibly uncomfortable to be there, whereas here I feel released from all of that stuff. All I think of here is being a filmmaker. I know I still speak with an English accent, but all that matters is that I make films. The rest doesn't really occur to anyone, certainly not to me. But every single time I get off that plane at Heathrow, those things bother me again.
- Tony:** It comes back.
- Alan:** It comes back and, in a way, it's creatively stifling. I find the anger so great that I can't work.
- Question:** In many of your films you have one or two characters who seem really alone. In *Angel Heart* and, of course, *Pink Floyd: The Wall* they seem to be fighting their own war. Why are you dealing with the singular character? What's the inner battle that he's fighting? Is that a point you're trying to stress?
- Alan:** I'm not sure I can respond to you.
- Question:** I guess I'm reading too much into it.
- Alan:** I guess I'm very suspicious of the academic approach to filmmaking because I never went to film school or university. I have to answer very simplistically because I'm a filmmaker who works intuitively and instinctively. From an intellectual point of view, I don't actually impose anything. In every single country I go to the audience sees a different link in all my films and I agree with every one. I don't mean to be glib, but to be honest with you, I really don't know. Sometimes I feel it's just me shouting out against the world, but it isn't really a conscious thing.
- Question:** What influence did Willem Dafoe's previous role as Jesus Christ in *The Last Temptation of Christ* have on your direction of him in *Mississippi Burning*?



- Alan:** Well, bear in mind that Willem had finished making the film, but Marty Scorsese hadn't finished cutting it so I hadn't seen it. Willem knew what he'd done and I think that's why he wanted to physically change how he looked. Actors are always very wary about having their hair cut, but he wanted it shorter and shorter and shorter because he'd been looking at Jesus Christ in the mirror for the last three months. He wanted something different. The physical thing was important to him.
- Question:** Would seeing him in that role have had much influence on you?
- Alan:** Obviously, I'd seen him in *Platoon* and *To Live and Die in L.A.*, but the decision to cast him was based on just meeting him really. It was instinctive. You can't really perceive an actor's usefulness for you by watching other people's films.
- Tony:** What are some of the films that have really made an impression on you graphically or visually?
- Alan:** Well, it's always difficult to answer that question because you go through different phases of influence—when you didn't know anything about film, when you began to know the medium and when you finally became a director. I think that when I didn't know anything about it, I was influenced by British work, and I was certainly influenced by American cinema more than European cinema. I was probably influenced by British cinema of the '40s, especially from a graphic point of view. I think I owe the visual images of many of my films to the work of Carol Reed, *The Third Man* especially, and the early David Lean films, *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*. When I began to make films, those images stuck in my head. When I started to direct, I was impressed by films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* which is, I think, a fantastic film. I'm a great admirer of Milos Forman and also Bernardo Bertolucci. When I was just starting to direct I saw *Last Tango in Paris* and thought that one day I'd like to make a film like that...or at least look for an apartment in Paris.
- Question:** You tend to emphasize a lot of browns and blues in your films. Is that something you think about?
- Alan:** Yes. I tend to like muted colors. I think it comes from the fact that we would like to make films in black and white, but we're not allowed to because of the commercial pressures on us. So what I've tended to do is black and white films in color. I take out all the primary colors from the costumes and the sets to achieve a monochromatic effect.
- Question:** Are you familiar with the documentary *Eyes on the Prize*?



Alan: Yes.

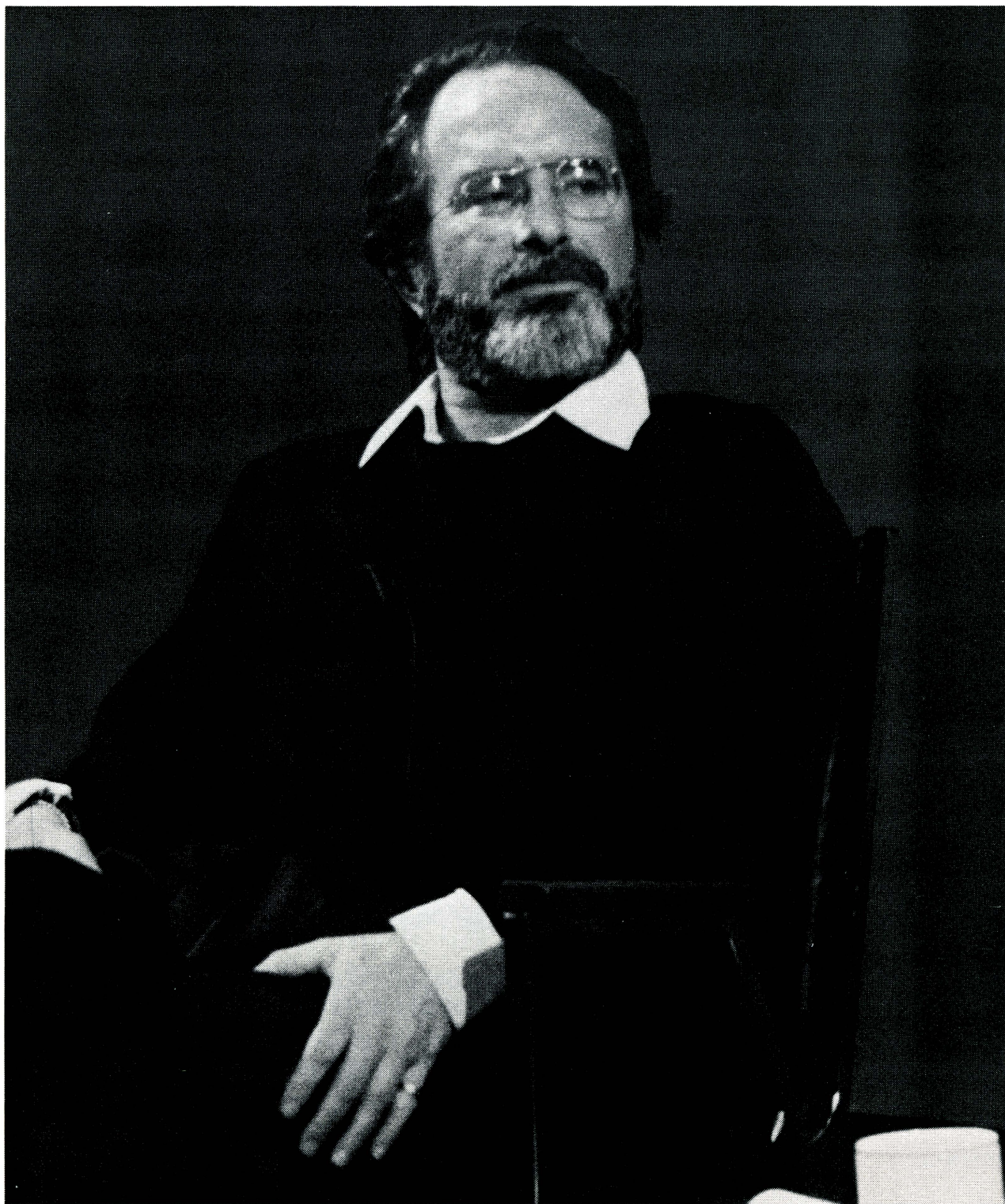
Question: That film and an interview I recently saw with Danny Glover from *The Color Purple* left me pretty concerned about *Mississippi Burning*. I haven't seen it yet, but I've heard both the negative and positive comments about it. As a director from England, how do you feel about directing a controversial film that deals with material that many American Black people hold dear?

Alan: I've heard that question many times, often from people who haven't seen the film.

Question: But I'm going to see the film.

Alan: Oh, good. Thank you. Well, you raise a very sensitive issue. I cannot make the film from anything but a white point of view because I'm white, and until a Black filmmaker does it, it will always be the "white" way. It's laughable for Danny Glover to compare it with *The Color Purple*. I found that film deeply insulting because it has nothing whatsoever to do with reality. It's the Hallmark card version of how Black people see themselves.

Question: He wasn't comparing *The Color Purple* to *Mississippi Burning*. He was only making a statement about being a Black person in the South during those times.



- Alan:** Well, when I worked with him he lived in San Francisco. I don't know if he ever lived in the South. But of course, he has lived as a Black man and I cannot really argue with his sensibility. But moral indignation is not a Black prerogative and racism is not only a Black problem. It's a Black problem and a white problem. We're all part of it and we're all guilty of it. I think that the fact that people have said that I could not do *Mississippi Burning* because I'm not Black is actually kind of insulting to me as a human being and when I hear those kind of criticisms I have to shut up or get angry as I did in Berlin. I will not argue about it anymore because I know why I made the film and I'm quite comfortable with why I made it. On the other hand, if Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP thinks that it's not accurate or if he has something else to say, that's fine. The film has helped give him another platform to speak up about these problems on national television. So, therefore, it may be a victory for us, no? But I have to take a great deal of criticism from Black political leaders. Ironically, if you see the film with an ordinary Black audience, the reaction is not the same at all.
- Question:** What do you mean by ordinary?
- Alan:** I am speaking of ordinary people who are not getting paid as professional politicians. By ordinary I mean the "rank and file" part of an American audience who is not defending a specific point of view.
- Question:** While you are on that subject, is that one of the reasons you turned down an interview on *Nightline*?
- Alan:** Yes, because I won't be put on confrontational American television and be manipulated. To me, *Nightline* is Morton Downey, Jr. with suits. To be placed in an adversarial role because I am white is not the reason I made the film. Gene Hackman did the interview and was decimated by Julian Bond. It's a no-win situation and I avoid it whenever possible.
- Question:** Can you comment on the trend toward minority directors, producers, cinematographers, etc.?
- Alan:** It's undoubtedly happening, but there is not enough opportunity, not nearly enough. Everything that can be done is being done by people like me who actually believe that something should be done. It's very hard to become a director. It's very difficult. There are a lot of young people around the world who aren't Black who also can't be directors. It's very, very difficult for Blacks because we live in a racist world. We cannot deny that it's a problem, but it's not the only reason that someone can't become a director. There are signs of change, but conversely, many Black performers in positions of power don't seem to do anything that's socially responsible. They are making the same old entertaining fluff that everybody else is making even though they can do important films. Bill Cosby and Eddie

Murphy can make any film they want to, but they don't seem to make socially relevant stuff. I think it's a double-edged sword that's so complicated and so difficult I certainly don't know the answers.

Question:

It's such a relief to know that you're not a school-trained filmmaker. I know it sounds like a contradiction in this place because we represent that kind of an education, but I think it's important because you said a filmmaker must, first and foremost, have an all-consuming desire and an unwavering commitment to do this. You have the attitude that people can find ways to make films regardless of their background. To elaborate on a previous question, how do you decide what project you want to commit yourself to in terms of ideas, time, energy, money?

Tony:

Someone else's money. Alan, why did you decide to make *Mississippi Burning*?

Alan:

When I finished *Angel Heart* I was living in Los Angeles for the first time and I was trying to get on with my own writing. But, every day I'd get a script in the mail and think, "Ah, this is the one. I won't have to write it. It's already finished." I got 91 scripts—I added them up—and, for the most part, they weren't any good and I didn't want to do them. In the last couple of years I've turned down *Rain Man*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *The Accidental Tourist*, and the list goes on. It's not just me. There's a list of directors who get offered everything and you don't always know why you respond to certain material.

Tony:

Why did you turn *Rain Man* down?

Alan:

I was asked to do *Rain Man* three years ago, before Dustin Hoffman was involved. Maybe if I knew he was doing it I would have agreed to do it. I think the film is excellent and I like it very much, but the original screenplay was very slight. The first draft had very little character development and it was very sentimental, but then it went through five different writers. Two get credited and will probably win the Academy Award and the other three will be very annoyed. So it did go through a lot of transformations. Most importantly, it had a star who was very involved in the development of the material and a director, Barry Levinson, who is also a writer. But to answer your question, I did *Mississippi Burning* because I think I usually react against whatever is in vogue at the moment. I need a script that has some kind of social or political backbone. Maybe I felt that I was going through a serious phase in my life and I needed to do something with more responsibility than *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*

Question:

How could you portray the two FBI agents as being pro-civil rights when, in fact, the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover were very anti-Black?

Alan: Well, this is true in general and it's a criticism that's often repeated. I have answered this question so many times. What you say is not entirely accurate regarding this particular event, but it is absolutely true to say that J. Edgar Hoover had no sympathy whatsoever for the civil rights struggle. He hated Martin Luther King. He thought he was a communist and would have done anything to do him harm. Many people thought Robert Kennedy, who was the Attorney General, and President Johnson would be able to force him to change that attitude. Ironically, the problem was not the fact that one Black kid and two white kids got killed. Suddenly, it was not a problem of the South and of Blacks in the South. It was a problem felt throughout America. The entire thing became politicized. Hoover was under so much pressure because it was 1964 and the beginning of the media circus. Suddenly, it was on national television every night, and he wanted to look good so he had the FBI pull out all the stops to solve the case. That element and Kennedy's effect stimulated an influx of political, caring young people represented by the Willem Dafoe character from the Justice Department. They came to Mississippi and some say their presence was a cynical public relations gambit. It's a callous thought, but they knew someone was going to end up dead with the kids coming down from the colleges and universities. They knew something was going to happen. So I do not mean to generalize about the FBI. The two characters don't do that. I think they're in conflict throughout the film, not just with one another, but with ideals. They might be the movie stars in the film, but they're not the stars of the film. Not for me. To me, the loudest voice in the film isn't white at all. It's Black.

Question: How did you gain credibility as a director when you first started out?

Alan: Well, judging by the criticism, I don't think I have gained credibility yet. It gets tougher and tougher every film you do.

Tony: Talk about how you began.

Alan: I wanted to write. I never wanted to direct. I never had any notion of being a director at all. All I wanted to do was write and gradually, directing seemed a logical extension of writing. I don't know how anyone who isn't able to write can aspire to direct. I know it happens, but it seems inappropriate to me. I started in England as a copywriter in advertising. It was the beginning of TV commercials, but nobody felt secure about how to make them. So we asked if we could have a 16mm camera to experiment with. Someone knew how to work a Spectra light meter. Someone knew how to work a Nagra tape recorder. Someone knew the camera. I was the only one who didn't know how to do anything so they said, "You better say action because anyone can say action." And that is how it started.

Question: What was it like to collaborate with Roger Waters on *Pink Floyd: The Wall*?

Alan: I think we collaborated well, but it wasn't a very pleasurable experience.

Question: Was he very possessive?

Alan: Yes, he was. You see, it was his baby and it was already a very successful record when I got involved with it. I don't know, but I think at that point it had sold 12 million records and was this huge rock 'n' roll show. It was probably one of the most extravagant rock 'n' roll theater events ever. It will never happen again because it was too expensive. They would build an entire wall in a stadium and project Gerald Scarfe's animation—the marching hammers and the two flowers making love—onto it with three projectors in sync. I don't know if you've ever seen it, but it was extraordinary and they wanted to make a film about it. I had already found out they wanted to make a film because I was interested in doing a film using just music and images as a narrative technique. So Roger Waters, Gerald Scarfe and I all worked together. We wrote a script, which is actually a very loose word for what it was—it was more of an extended treatment really—and then I said that the only way I could do it was to have Roger walk away while I made the film. That's what happened, but when Roger came back he wanted to be very much involved. That was very difficult for me and it basically ignited a clash of egos. Both he and I had been used to being in total creative control—he in his world and me in mine—and I don't think either of us could come to terms with that. But although I don't have fond memories of the process, I think the clash of personalities produced good work. I keep getting asked to do rock 'n' roll videos, but I never do them because I'm sure there's a Roger Waters in every band.

Tony: How much does your awareness of the audience affect your work? You work emotionally and you're able to make films that speak to masses of people. You're interested in pushing the form, finding and inventing new means of connection. How do you balance the demands of a medium that requires both people and the need for personal expression?

Alan: Well, I think my basic technique owes much to American cinema which, as we said earlier, is the cinema of the audience from the point of view of the rhythms, the forward energy of what's known as the "headlock" school of filmmaking. You know, grab them by the neck and pull them through the film and throw them out at the end. I think the forward energy of an American film is the biggest difference between it and European cinema and certainly the difference between it and Japanese cinema. I have internalized the technique and it's not something I think about anymore. Once I know that I can actually entertain an audience and not bore them silly, I try to challenge them with ideas. All that changes is ideas and it's the ideas that break the form, not the techniques. You know when I first started directing, all I ever worried about was blocking a scene out. Should I track, should I zoom, should I get him to sit down, should it be a two-shot, should it be over the shoulder, etc. In the



beginning you are terrified by that, but after a while you realize that it is actually the simplest thing to master. You're safe with techniques. The ideas and being sure of what you're trying to say, or whether you even have something to say, is the most difficult thing of all.

Question: What are your attitudes on audience testing and trailers?

Alan: You know, these days we have to show our work to an audience before release. If all of you, for example, saw my film for the first time—and you're more knowledgeable perhaps than a normal audience—you would write comments about what you liked and didn't like about the film. In fact, *Mississippi Burning* was first tested in the suburbs of Chicago and it tested so well that I didn't have to change anything. If it had tested badly—I mean if the entire NAACP and the film critics were there shaking their heads—I would have been under pressure to make changes. But, in the end, I have to be pretty single-minded about what I've done, even if I've done it incorrectly. And I want you to know that when I sit with an audience and watch the film, I see it for the very first time.

Tony: Collectively, with the special chemistry an audience provides.

Alan: Yes. Something happens. It *is* a totally chemical thing. A film does not exist in a film can or in my editing room or on a Moviola or a Steenbeck or a KEM. It only exists when it flickers up there and all of you experience it. Suddenly every single thing is exaggerated. Everything that was good looks even better and everything that was bad looks diabolical. The audience reaction is invaluable. But to actually allow all of you to contribute to the making of my films would obviously be destructive.

Tony: That's beautifully said.

Question: How do you feel the controversy about *Angel Heart* has affected you as a filmmaker? Do you think the rating system in general has too much influence on the way films are made?

Alan: That's funny. We were talking earlier about doing sex scenes. Without a doubt they are, in a peculiar sort of way, the most difficult scenes to do. I remember the first one I ever did. The actor and actress were sitting there in their robes and said, "What would you like us to do?" and I said, "I know what I do, but I don't know what you do." You experience this strange voyeur thing which is actually very enjoyable in a funny kind of way. It's amusing to watch the rushes. There is a scene in *Angel Heart* where Mickey Rourke and Lisa Bonet make love as it rains blood. The cinematographer, camera operator, camera assistant and I filmed for about four hours. If you watch the rushes, it seems like you're watching two

people making love when suddenly this strange Englishman comes into the scene—just to help Mickey along, mind you. Lisa Bonet needed no help, I hasten to add. But that's not really answering your question. Having done *Angel Heart* and *Pink Floyd: The Wall*, which was sometimes very extreme, I have come to believe that censorship of any kind is absolutely inappropriate and I don't think any artist, any sensible person, will disagree. Clap, clap. OK, thanks. But you know, one doesn't necessarily do his best work because he can do anything he wants. Actually, it is possible to lose a sense of yourself in an artistic way. I don't know if you've ever seen a pornographic film, but they're not very sexual or sensual. They're pathetic. Sometimes it can be very valuable to discipline yourself and to realize that small things are often infinitely sexier than the obvious. The situation with *Angel Heart* was kind of irritating because there is not supposed to be censorship in this country since it contravenes freedom of speech. Instead you've got six anonymous people at a place called Sherman Oaks in Los Angeles and they judge whether a film will get an "R" or whatever. When they said *Angel Heart* got an "X" I said, "What is it that offends you?" and they said, "We can't tell you because that would be censorship." I asked them if they could give me a clue and at first they wouldn't, but finally they said that there was something lurking in reel five. It turned out to be ten feet of Mickey Rourke's backside going up and down which I've since put in a frame on my wall. I don't know if any of you have seen Mickey Rourke's backside, but it's no loss to the world of cinema.

- Question:** Where do you go now that you're a successful director and on top of things? What are your goals or have you reached all your goals?
- Alan:** The tragedy is, as you know, that you're only as good as your last film. You can be very hot in this business, but you can become very cold very quickly. I don't think you can be too secure. You just hope that you can improve all the time. I hope that my next film will be better than my last. It doesn't always work out that way, but you've got to keep trying. Sometimes people ask me about the Oscars, but it might be better not to win one because you know you've got to try harder next time. On the other hand, if you win you might be an infinitely nicer person, you know?
- Tony:** Can you talk for a moment about your next project, the script you've just finished?
- Alan:** It's a love story between a white American man and a Japanese-American girl set against the background of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.
- Question:** Last year, as everybody knows, *The Last Emperor* won a lot of Academy Awards, but from a Chinese point of view there are certain things we just cannot accept. How can a foreigner deal with material like this when it's not his?

- Alan:** Well, I don't believe that art is nationalistic. It doesn't belong to anybody. It's about humanity. It's about people. If you're a filmmaker, that's all you're doing no matter where it is. The fact that we put so many labels on one another is actually the beginning of all of our problems and I think if you start with that at your age, it's pretty unfortunate. I don't think you can put up barriers and say only a particular person can make a film about a particular nationality. I think that's very narrow and in the history of art it hasn't proven to be true.
- Question:** How do you feel about *The Last Emperor* as a film?
- Alan:** I thought it was a remarkable film. It just happens that there isn't a Chinese director with the skills of Bernardo Bertolucci at this point in time. When there is, maybe they'll do it better. Maybe when you finish school, you'll be the one.
- Question:** It would be the same thing if *Mississippi Burning* was made by a Black director.
- Alan:** I don't know that there's any difference, but hopefully my film will allow a Black director to do yet another film. It won't necessarily be any better, but it might be different and there's a place for all of us.
- Tony:** Can you discuss some of the values that are intriguing you about the new project?
- Alan:** Well, at a very simplistic level, I have wanted to do a love story for some time. I've tried to do different genres each time and that's one genre I don't think I've tackled properly. You could argue that *Shoot the Moon* is a love story, but it's different.
- Tony:** It really involves a painful separation and a suggestion of reapproachment.
- Alan:** Also, I believe it makes very good cinema to set any kind of love story or personal story against a very strong background—in this case, a particularly sensitive and largely unknown period in American history.
- Question:** I don't know whether I can phrase this very coherently, but if you compare cinema with writing and painting as vehicles for ideas, writing and painting are perhaps easier because they enable you to work in the abstract. When you work with cinema, it is very realistic in that you're using a camera and real things. Do you feel you're up against the limitations of the medium itself and that the medium is an enemy of ideas?
- Alan:** No, because I think that disciplines in art can often create the best art. In a political sense, for instance, Andrzej Wajda in Poland has done incredible work despite the rigidity of the

*MIDNIGHT
EXPRESS Billy
Hayes (BRAD
DAVIS) and
Erich
(NORBERT
WEISSER)*



*MIDNIGHT
EXPRESS* Billy
Hayes (BRAD
DAVIS)



political system. He has to work in another way. He has to find an allegory in order to say what he wants to say. And the same thing is true, in a sense, of American cinema because it is a commercial cinema. The discipline of having to reach an audience requires you to think in a different way. It's more difficult and you have to be clever, but I don't feel that it's restrictive. One must try to break the form every so often and I think I broke it with *Pink Floyd: The Wall* by combining violent images with animation and animation with cinematic images. It is possible to do. It can be restricting, but to me it's exciting. It's not writing and it's not painting. Film is what it is, you know?

Tony: Another question.

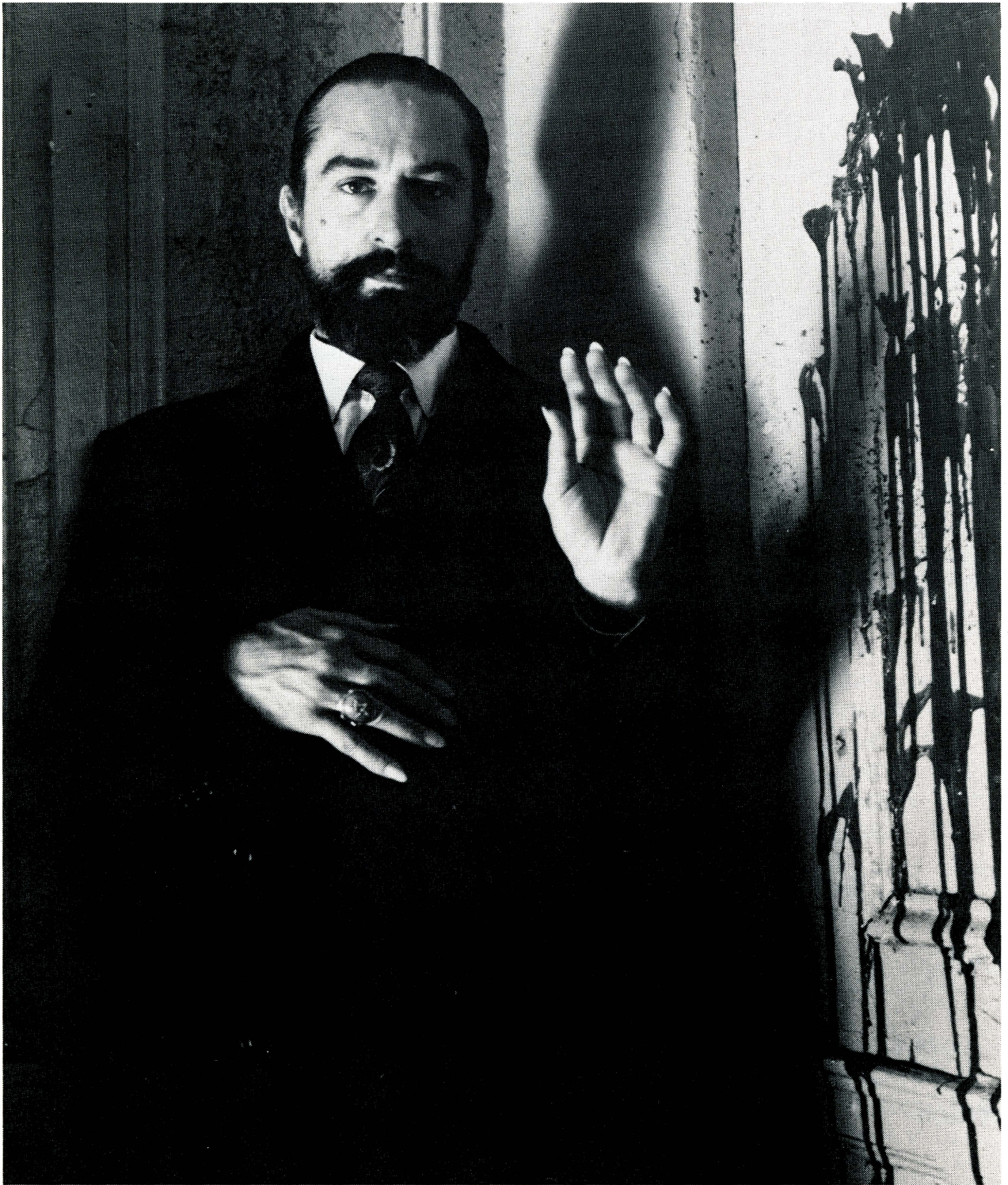
Question: Can you talk about Oliver Stone who wrote *Midnight Express*?

Alan: Oliver Stone? Well, he's a bit like Roger Waters. Maybe it's my problem. But on *Midnight Express* we didn't really have a lot to do with one another. He came to London and wrote the script, tapping away in our back office. We talked, but not a great deal. It was an excellent script, a fantastic script, and then I never saw him again until the Academy Awards. To be honest with you, I don't really know him and I haven't seen him since.

- Tony:** You talked at dinner about offending Turkish sensibilities with *Midnight Express*. In fact, you said that perhaps you had made a mistake in your approach.
- Alan:** Well, I made it about ten years ago and there was a certain degree of naiveté in the film. I'm very proud of it, I should say, and it happens to have a great effect on people. But I was so single-minded about making a film about injustice that it didn't occur to me that I was criticizing one race. On the other hand, if I did it now I don't know that it would be any more valid because you put in two or three nice Turkish people who are your token nice guys. It's like those films about the German prisoner-of-war camps with one Nazi lance corporal who sells cigarettes to the prisoners to show that they're not all psychopathic killers. I think that kind of tokenism is kind of ugly, too. But the issue is still very disturbing and when I recently spoke at UCLA, many Turkish students told me that every time the film runs on television, they feel badly the next day. That disturbs me more than anything. Making films is an enormous responsibility.
- Question:** What part do you play in the editing of your films? I got this from the book, "101 Things to Ask Should You Ever Meet a Famous Director." But seriously, do you work with your editor or does the editor work off a shotlist or do you just let the editor go and then when it's done say, "Oh, God, it's not my bloody film!"
- Alan:** Do I really speak like that? Didn't you look it up in the back of the book? My editor, Gerry Hambling, has worked on all eight of my films. In fact, he's worked on everything I've ever done, including all the work I did before beginning in features. I trust him implicitly and I never shoot anything that he doesn't improve on. He could take the worst thing I've ever filmed and do something with it. I'm very fortunate because you can also get a bad editor who can make things worse. But, in the end, if you haven't shot it, it's not going to be there in the editing.
- Tony:** Do you let him put together the first cut without you or are you there every day in the editing room?
- Alan:** I'm there every day, and I'm in and out all the time, but I'm not sitting on his shoulder for every single cut. We talk about it quite thoroughly and I give him complete notes as to how I think it should be, but then I've got to allow him his input. He's a great talent and I would be crazy not to allow him to contribute.
- Question:** How much pre-production time do you spend with your actors? How much backstory do they need? How much is spontaneous?

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ANGEL HEART
Louis Cyphre
(ROBERT
DeNIRO)

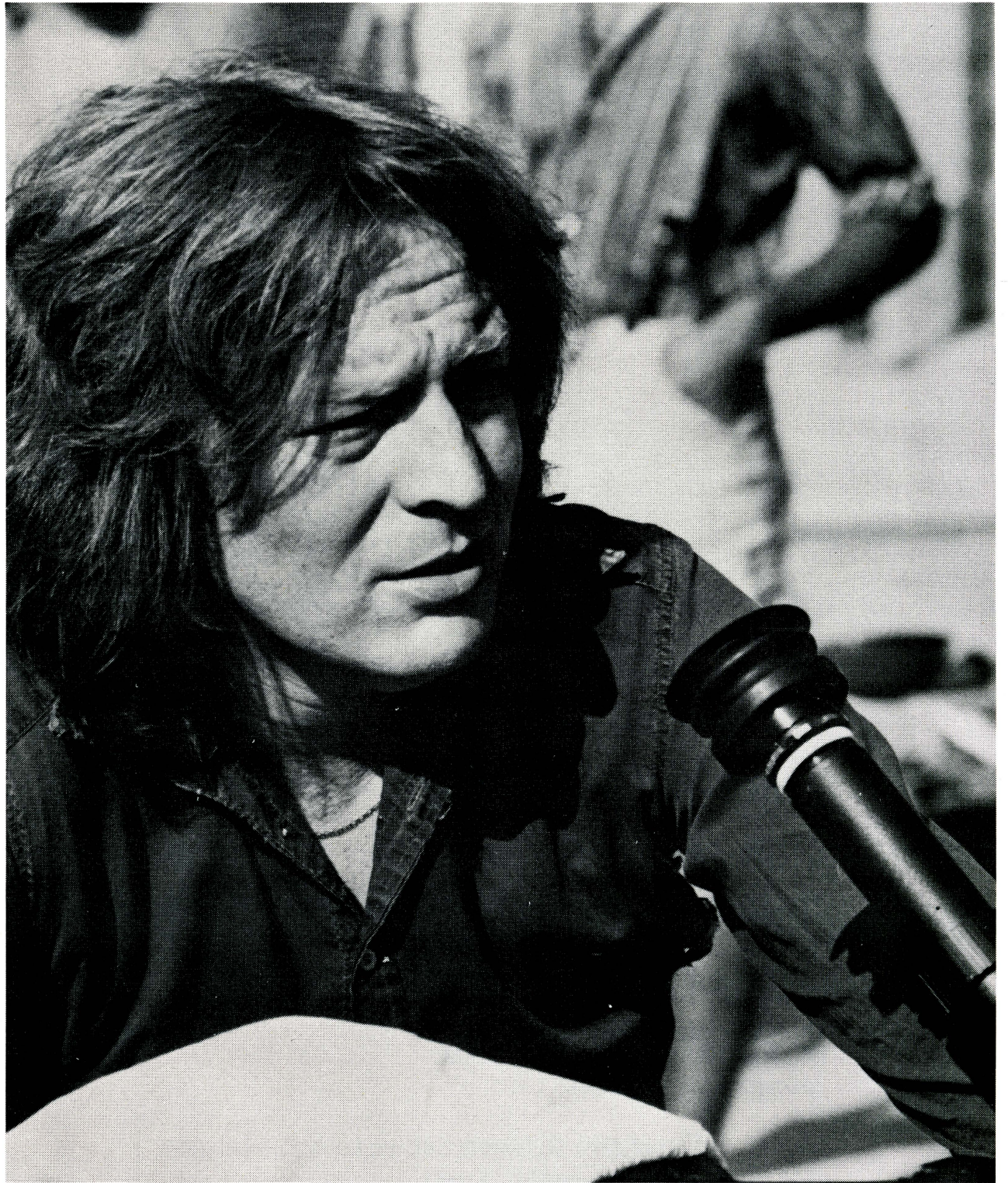


- Alan:** Well, I'm not a great believer in over-rehearsing. I think that it can become too theatrical. The beauty of the film set is that it offers a potential for spontaneity. On the other hand, you don't want the actors to be introduced to one another on the first day of photography. What I tend to do is spend a lot of time reading through the script with the actors rather than actually blocking it out. Some actors require more back-story than others. Some require extensive psychological preparation. Some don't require anything at all. With Gene and Willem, most of the conversation was about what didn't work, what didn't gel, what didn't seem truthful. But it was worked out during pre-production rather than during the shooting. I worked very differently with Mickey Rourke and Robert DeNiro. I rehearsed a lot of different scenes with Mickey before shooting, but we rehearsed on film with DeNiro. I had to shoot with two cameras because they both improvise so much. If one went off, the other one would go off with him. Sometimes out of that spontaneity comes something magical, but often for many, many thousands of feet of film, nothing magical happens. You can't shoot in a normal sequence involving reverse angles because it's difficult to repeat a moment that occurs in an improvisational situation.
- Tony:** How do you feel about video assist?
- Alan:** I never use it because you end up with eight people sitting around looking at the playback and saying, "Oh, I don't like that," and suddenly you've got eight directors. For certain moments it is useful. If you're blowing up a building or whatever, you need to see what you've got on film because it happens so quickly that you don't know how it looks. But in a dramatic situation I tend to trust my instincts because I am not accustomed to video assist. It's an addition that I find clumsy and awkward whereas some directors grew up with videotape and find it comfortable as a reference.
- Tony:** Do you write on a computer?
- Alan:** Uh, no.
- Tony:** It's got to be an Underwood then, huh?
- Alan:** I like to hear the sound of it, you know?
- Question:** You see a lot of great scripts...
- Tony:** You don't see a lot of great scripts.
- Question:** What do you look for in a script?

- Alan:** I don't know. The quality of the writing isn't necessarily the first thing I look for. It's the ideas. I usually try to find things that are different from what people are thinking at that moment in time. Films tend to come in clusters because the studios are trying to copy one another. I avoid that and look for something that's original. I don't know whether it happens unconsciously, but I always seem to choose something that is at odds with what is trendy.
- Tony:** You're getting tired. I feel your energy waning.
- Alan:** I think I'm still on European time.
- Tony:** Alan, the rhythms and the movement in your work and the fact that you create people who continue to care is important and I really respect what you're trying to do. We have to close now, but I want to say that you're a helluva fine filmmaker. I know we want to keep him, but he's come all the way from London and Berlin. He's just come from a film conference where he saw 128 student films. Can you imagine? Let's let him go, OK? Thank you, Alan Parker. We love you and wish you luck.

Mr. Parker's Feature Film Credits

Bugsy Malone 1976
Midnight Express 1978
Fame 1980
Shoot the Moon 1981
Pink Floyd: The Wall 1981
Birdy 1984
Angel Heart 1986
Mississippi Burning 1988
Come See the Paradise 1990



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