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A Conversation With Jonathan Demme

Jonathan Demme

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Recommended Citation

Demme, Jonathan and Loeb, Anthony, "A Conversation With Jonathan Demme" (1991). *A Conversation With...*. 9.
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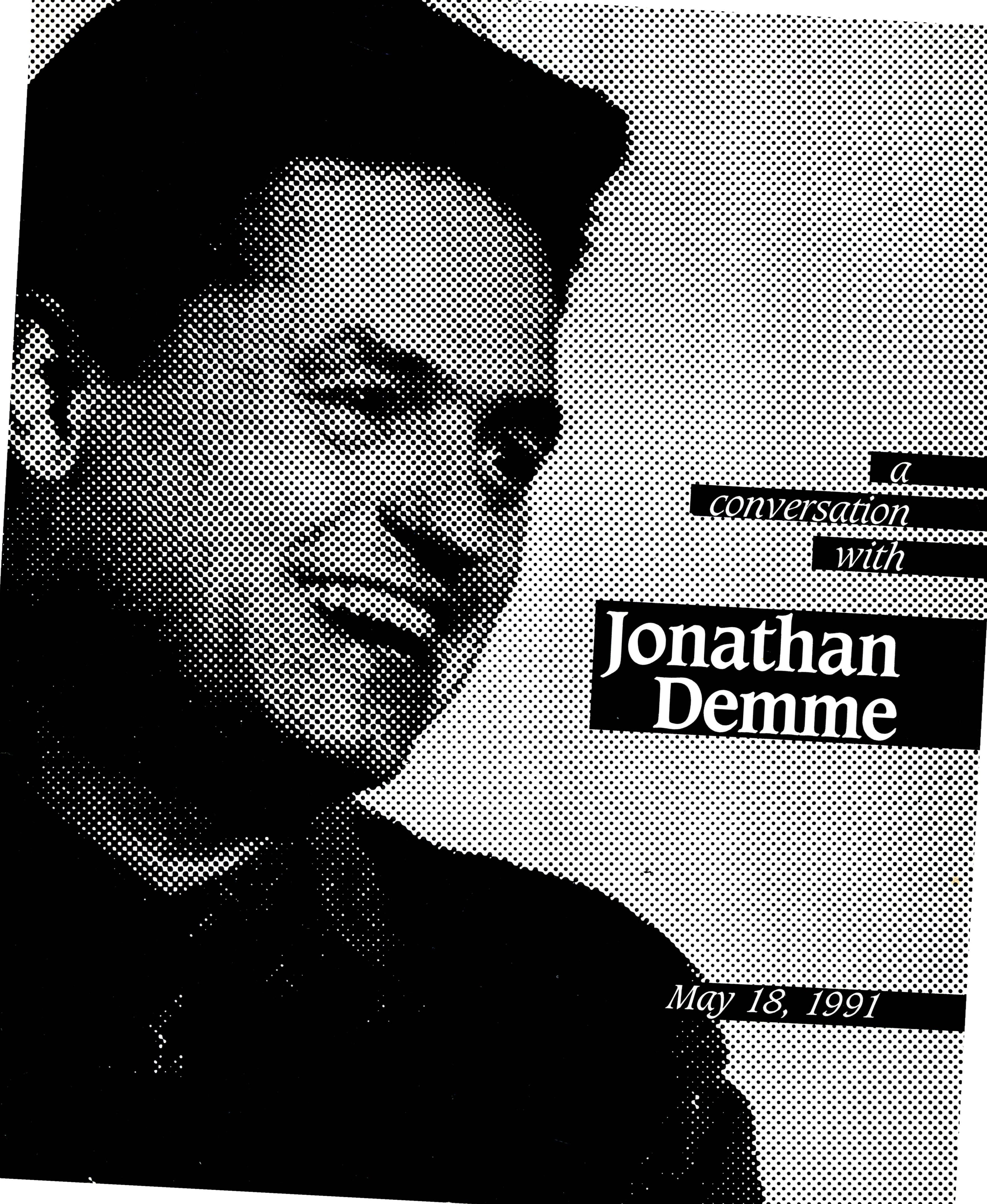
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Anthony Loeb: It's my pleasure to introduce Jonathan Demme. He has evolved from lean budgets and quickie screenplays—the essence of his days with Roger Corman—into an independent spirit and one of our most important directors. He has been unconventional and uncommonly successful with such films as "Something Wild", "Melvin and Howard" and "The Silence of the Lambs" which is currently in release. I would like to welcome you, Jonathan.

Jonathan Demme: I'm happy to be here.

Tony: Can you tell us something about how you began?

Jonathan: Well, I was born on Long Island and lived in New York and as a kid all I was interested in was animals and movies. I wanted to be a veterinarian until my first week of college chemistry. Everbody else was scribbling things down and looking enthusiastically at the teacher and I just didn't get it. I didn't realize it at the time but I was making a big transition. I had saved up money for college and my mother pulled out a couple of hundred bucks so I could stay up in Gainesville for a trimester, but I wasn't budgeted to go to the movies and I had always been a serious moviegoer. I noticed that the college newspaper didn't have a film critic and somehow, even though I knew nothing about the movie business, as a young student in Tallahassee, Florida, I understood that I could become the film critic for *The Florida Alligator* and see movies for free. So I went in and asked the editor if I could apply for the position and he told me to go down and see what was playing at the State and write a review. But I've got a confession to make—instead of going to the State to see "The Long Arm of the Law" with Peter Sellers, I went to the library and looked up the reviews in *Time* and *Newsweek.* So I got a sense of the film and rushed back to the editor and gave him a review and he said that I could be the film critic. From then on, I did see the films before I reviewed them. My next apocryphal feat was back in Miami. I had left college because I wasn't going to be a veterinarian and I went back to working at an animal hospital. I don't know if there are any film critics here, but if there are, you all know that once you go to the movies for free you hate to start paying again. So, I went to *The Coral Gables Times,* a little bi-weekly shopping guide, and became their film critic. I was now, in my own funny little way, inside the movie industry, but it still never occurred to me that I could become part of making films. My father was the publicity director for the fabled Fountainbleau Hotel and Joseph E. Levine, that great movie mogul from the '50s and '60s and into the '70s, used to tie his houseboat up in the canal opposite the Fountainbleau. My father met him and told him that his twenty-year-old son was a film critic and Joseph E. Levine said, "Oh, you must have him come to the houseboat with his reviews." So I went with my little scrapbook of reviews—and, yes, everyone was smoking cigars—and he opened up the scrapbook and flipped through some of my reviews until he got to a review of a movie

called "Zulu" which I had reviewed very favorably. Now that I am a much more politically conscious person than I was then I would probably review it unfavorably in various ways, but I liked it and was really very laudatory about it. Well, Levine read the review of "Zulu" which, by the way, he produced and said, "Ah, you've got great taste," and actually looked up at me and actually said, "You wanna come to work for me?" and of course I said, "Yes," and with a wave of his arm he said, "What do you want? New York, London or Rome?" and I said, "I'll take New York." And, as fate would have it, I joined the Air Force Reserves to get my military obligation out of the way and got a job writing press releases for his publicity department. Given that I love making films, I was very lucky to have met Joseph E. Levine on his houseboat because it got me inside the movie business. And again, as fate would have it, I met Roger Corman when I went to do publicity writing for a movie he was making in Ireland called "Von Richthofen and Brown". As I sat down to be interviewed by Roger, he said, "Do you like motorcycle movies?" and I said, "Oh, yes, very much, especially your 'Wild Angels'", and he said, "You've got good taste." Well, he may have said something like that, but what he did say was, "OK, fine. Listen, I'm starting up this new film company called New World Pictures. You seem like a bright young man. Why don't you write a motorcycle script for me when you finish the publicity job on this movie." And of course I said, "yes," and teamed up with Joe Viola, a friend of mine, and we wrote a motorcycle movie. We knew that some motorcycle movies had been very successful in cannibalizing the samurai genre. "The Seven Samurai", for example, became "The Savage

Seven", a very good motorcycle movie, and "Yojimbo" had become not only "A Fistful of Dollars", but also a motorcycle movie. So we just picked "Rashomon", of all things, and wrote a motorcycle movie. Is this answer too long?

Tony: Not at all. The circumstances of fate that seem to enter your life are fascinating. To us in the Midwest, Roger Corman is a kind of myth. Scorsese started there. Coppola started there. Can you give us a sense of what kind of man would simply look at you and say, "Write a script."? How were you dressed that day? But seriously, tell us about the man. His movies often seem exploitive. Is he a cynical man? Is he conscious of the universe or is he simply after the buck?

Jonathan: It's been many years since I've worked for him. In fact, he has occasionally played parts in a few of the movies I've done over the years. Roger Corman is, uncomplicatedly, one of my great personal heroes. He is a stingy, money-grubbing multimillionaire who loves movies very much. You actually encounter people like that from time to time in the film business and he's one of them. He loves film and he loves women and that can translate into two things in his films—he wants to see women triumphing over tremendous odds in many genres and just kicking the shit out of men, but on the other hand, he also likes to see women naked. You can't really separate Roger's significant love and regard for women from

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who he is. I don't know why he gave any of us opportunities. As you know, the number of people he's given opportunities to is legend. He's good at spotting someone who's going to be a really hard worker and that's the fundamental thing. He's got a really terrific instinct for that even if the person doesn't realize it. I didn't realize that about myself at the time. Well, anyway, Joe and I gave him the script and started to walk away thinking, "Gosh, it would be incredible if this thing ever gets made," and Roger said, "Joe, John, c'mon, let's go to the bar and I'll read it." So we sat down and Roger started reading the script with Joe and I sitting there making small talk, trying to be cool. So Roger finished reading the script and said, "OK, the knifing's very good and the rape will be very effective. Just throw out all this interpretation of reality thing and get more into that stuff and come out to California. Joe, you directed commercials, so you direct. Joh, uh, you come out and produce it." I don't know what I had done, but the next thing I knew, three months later, I was a 25-year-old movie producer out in Los Angeles making lists at night of all the things that were giving me anxiety and recognizing that those were the things that I had to solve the next day in order to alleviate the anxiety. So anyway, Roger's whole thing was, you know, these films need, uh...

Tony: Sex.

Jonathan: They need sex. The sex was there with action, humor and a subtle political statement. He wanted it in there, but subtle was very important. And he wanted a provocative title. Our first motorcycle movie was called "Angels Hard as They Come".

Tony: Are these male or female angels?

Jonathan: They were male angels. And after that we made "The Hot Box" in the Philippines. Roger's a really sincere bleeding heart. He wants the films to have a kind of liberal slant to them and he means it. In those days, his whole thing was to make movies for a small amount and pay everybody, as we know, meager salaries. Well, the movies would be released on thousands of drive-ins and they'd make their money back the very first weekend. And Roger has successfully done versions of this ever since. He also happened to be a wonderful teacher. I had a one-hour lunch with him one day and he just machine-gunned rules about how to direct and how to make things visually interesting. Over the years, I've thought about that lunch and how I might have known those rules anyway, but hadn't really applied them to the task at hand. When I was going to direct my first movie, it was terrific to hear all these rules put forth in a way that I haven't really heard or seen before or since. He's a great guy. He's just wonderful.

Tony: Let's talk for a moment about "The Silence of the Lambs". How can you help us understand

some of the ideas that Roger Corman had about the executing of a movie like this?

Jonathan: Well, one example is a very fundamental rule that we all know, but Roger actually said this to me and I realized that I was hearing something that I should retain. At the end of "The Silence of the Lambs", the heroine is tracking the villain and she doesn't know where he is and she secures one last door and turns around cutting to her point of view as she moves towards this other door and even though I made the movie, I find it deeply disturbing to be approaching that door. I mean, when I watch that film there's a couple of moments where I can suddenly get slightly galvanized by what I'm seeing. Roger told me many years ago that the most terrifying shot in movies is a handheld camera moving slowly towards a closed door. And it is. He said some terrific things. I think our lunch that day boiled down to this whole idea of never ever forgetting the primacy of the eyeball. For example, everyone here who is connected with films knows that it's important to have something in the foreground from time to time. The eye likes that. It's the single most important organ in the experience of watching a movie. The brain, hopefully, is an important organ as well, but if you can't get past the eyeball, you'll never get to the brain. You must try very hard to keep the eye stimulated by moving the camera whenever possible, but never in an unmotivated way. Or if you're in a room too small to move the camera, then get a variety of angles so that you can create movement through editing. Roger went on and on that day about the basics, but it's wonderful to hear that when you're about to direct your first movie. It really had a tremendous impact on me. It's sort of a textbook approach, but you can't get away from it if you want the movie to be lively.

Tony: When was the last time you saw your first Roger Corman movie?

Jonathan: I don't look at hardly any. It's been a long time. It's painful. I don't know how anybody else is, but I know that even now with "The Silence of the Lambs", which I saw again fairly recently, we can never get to a place in watching our old work where we can relax and really enjoy it. The same mistakes pop up, as maddening as ever, and I think there's a buildup. I sort of hate my films more and more, furious at them for having all these flaws. I should have known better. Actually, one of the things that keeps me interested in making films is the hope that maybe someday I can actually make one that I can watch later and think, "Yes, that's my film".

Tony: So, would you like to see "Caged Heat"?

Jonathan: The entire film or a quick moment?

Tony: I have a couple of clips here. How about "Crazy Mama"?

Jonathan: Oh, sure, but do you want to see them?

Tony: Let me say that I have not seen these films before looking for the clips, but I feel that there is a vulnerability in the framework that you created, perhaps unconsciously, at the beginning of your career. So I'm offering these as scenes from movies that I think we can all respect.

Jonathan: If I had known that one day I'd be sitting on the stage of the Music Box in Chicago. . . . "Caged Heat" is obviously a wannabe Sam Fuller as any poor little low-budget women's prison movie could be. That one was made for $185,000, but of course that was in the mid-seventies. Gosh, that was a case in which Roger's rules certainly tried to be very present. All of us were conducting our education in public, more or less. All the actors were new to acting, I was certainly new to directing, and this was Tak Fujimoto's first feature. We shot it in four weeks. Erica Gatten from "Vixen" was in it. I don't know what else to say. I found the way it visualized the plight of people in prison very moving tonight . . . We were trying very hard. It's funny the things that happen to you as you're trying to forge out a career in filmmaking. Roger liked "Caged Heat" a lot and it did quite well at drive-ins. He could see the hard work on screen so he assigned me to write a redneck revenge movie along the line of "Walking Tall" or "Billy Jack", both of which were very popular at the time. He

suggested setting it against the backdrop of stripmining. So I went out and did research and learned about the difficulty that farmers and small ranch owners were having at the hands of mining companies and got a lot of very exciting material. I developed a great passion and feeling for the subject and was getting close to what I felt was going to be a script that we were going to make. When I got a phonecall from Roger I was sort of expecting for him to set a start date on "Fighting Mad", as it was called. But instead he said, "We're shelving 'Fighting Mad', but I want you to start directing 'Crazy Mama' in ten days. You have casting sessions today at 1:00." Shirley Clark was supposed to direct "Crazy Mama". This great independent filmmaker was going to make "Crazy Mama". It's mindboggling, isn't it? I mean Shirley Clark's "Crazy Mama"? But she had the inevitable falling out with Roger and his wife, Julie, who was producing the film, and had quit. But they had a start date and, more importantly, the picture was booked in theaters in two months. In those days, Roger would put a title out to the drive-ins and say, "We're going to have 'Crazy Mama' ready May 15" and if enough theaters booked it, he would go ahead and have the script written and make it. I'm sure he doesn't do it that way anymore. So I suddenly found myself just devastated that we weren't going to be doing "Fighting Mad" because, as you know, you get all swept up in these things. You really get immersed in the subject of your next film and there was no way that it was going to happen. It was clear in his mind that I was going to do this. So I drew the line and said, "I must read the script before I have the casting session." Then he said, "By the way, several parts have already been cast and you have to rewrite the script by this weekend." So, "Crazy Mama" was shot in three weeks. There were some wonderful actors in it who I hope are familiar to some people—Warren Miller, Merle Earle, who played the wonderful old woman—and as I'm watching this I suddenly see Stuart Whitman. So anyway, we shot it in two or three weeks—what's the difference—and edited it in ten days with two editors, Lewis Teague and Allan Holzman. Lewis and Allan, both of whom have gone on to make a lot of films, were so busy writing their critiques of my directing for Roger because they were both desperate to direct they would take a look at a cut and, instead of coming to me to find out what I wanted to do, would race to their typewriter and type up all these notes and then give them to Roger so that he would understand where the greatest consciousnesses lied. It was very hard to try to get something satisfactory under those circumstances, but it all kind of, you know, that all passed as well. I had told Roger that there were many things I wanted to do on that film. We had to do a scene where Peter Fonda . . . Oops, I just segued into another movie, so never mind. Do you have "Fighting Mad" here?

Tony: No, I don't have "Fighting Mad".

Jonathan: See, they never show the ones you like.

Tony: I would be proud of those images. There is some very good work here—the pans, the zooms,

the complexity of the background, the complexity of craft in the shot of the old woman that leads you into a counterpreparation for reversal. There's some very interesting work here.

Jonathan: Well, truthfully, I can respond to the effort that I see in some of the shots, but in actuality, these films are profoundly limited by the demands of a drive-in audience. At the time we made "Caged Heat" I can truly tell you that I felt very strongly that this was a good film to make because teenagers at the drive-in, especially the teenage girls, would see it and be terrified at the idea of perhaps winding up in jail one day and finding themselves subjects for psychotherapy at the hands of some terrible warden. And I felt, yeah, it's good to make this kind of film.

Tony: Psychotherapy at the hands of a terrible warden?

Jonathan: "Caged Heat" was the first American film that ever truly explored the subject of behavioral modification . . .

Tony: Well, what about "The Silence of the Lambs"? There seems to be a kind of strange therapeutic professional relationship between the crazy doctor and Jodie.

Jonathan: Well, I'm kind of distanced from "The Silence of the Lambs" in a pleasurable way because it's

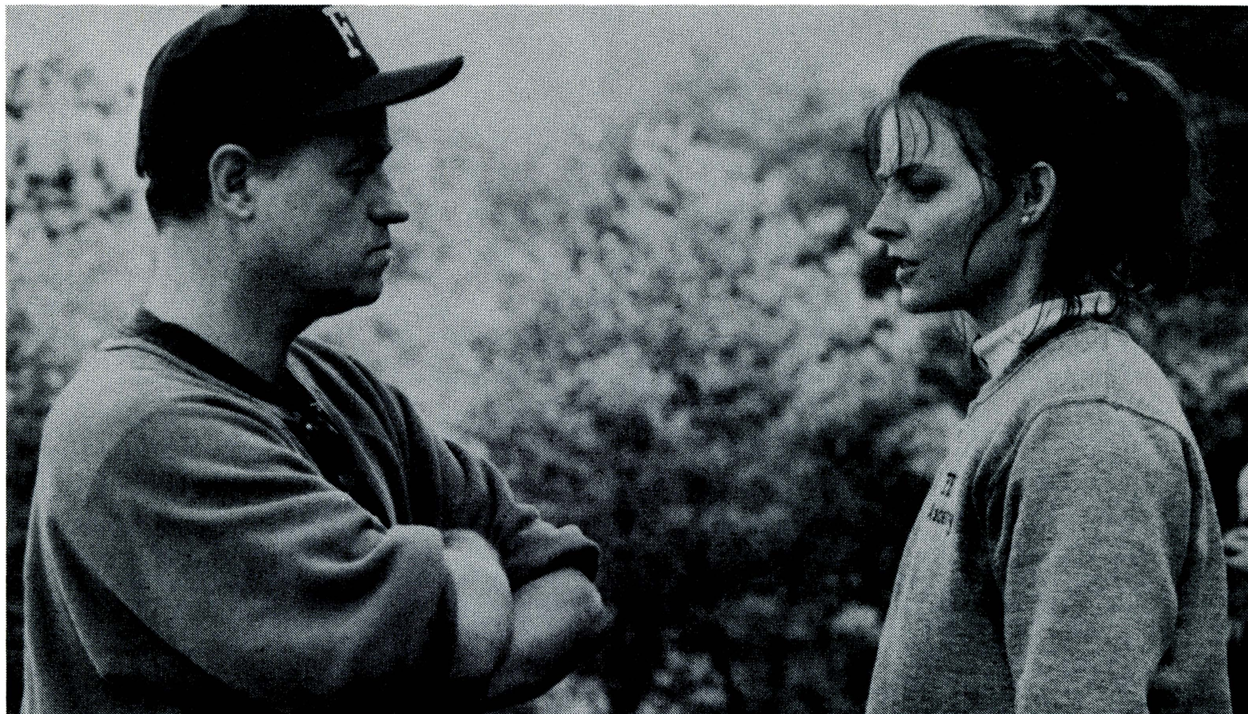
very, very much the brainchild of Thomas Harris who wrote the book. Personally, I love a good yarn and I really love strong characters who speak in ways that don't sound like dialogue and kind of pull you inside. I especially love the idea of a movie where the heroine is actually psychoanalyzed in a big scene in the middle of the movie and liberated by having some doors unlocked in her mind. With my minimal understanding of psychology, I loved the fact that the heroine goes through a therapy session in a very gripping scene with other purposes in mind. And I think it does so kind of seamlessly.

Tony: You're leaving the impression that you are involved in the strategy of storytelling and what might be gripping is the dominant part of your inspiration. But all of us who saw that scene are pushed to another level of awareness. It's a very threatening kind of scene—a women confronting the beast and the levels of pain that are called up. Are you working with that awareness or are you totally engaged in the craft of filmmaking? In other words, the subtext we're all looking for in films is very powerful and frightening.

Jonathan: More than anything, I'm just mad about the character of Clarice. I admire her so much. I admire her courage and her intuition and I feel that she is that rarer than ever kind of person, a truly decent person. I'm so taken by her and I feel for her in what she must endure in her mission to try to save a life. I had some very powerful feelings for her on paper and then as brought to life by Jodie Foster. I can't tell you what it was like to be standing there watching her on the video monitor. By the way, I love monitors so I don't have to sneak around and peek behind the camera because I'm worried about getting in the actor's eyeline. I loved Jodie's performance in this film so much. It moves me tremendously. To be standing there watching her bring this stuff to life was an extraordinary experience quite apart from having, on one level, nothing to do with directing the movie. So that's a big part of what was going on with me during the shooting of that scene. On another level, I make sure that my enchantment is as constant as possible. If she loses me a little tiny bit at one particular moment, I'll remember that and at the end of the take, I'll go to her and tell her where I thought things slacked and see if that will stimulate her in another take to make that moment as powerful as all the others.

Tony: Can you give us a specific direction you gave her? We're all interested in hearing how you work with actors emotionally because these are such difficult scenes to do.

Jonathan: I'll probably think of that in a second. So meanwhile, Tak Fujimoto keeps coming up to me between shots saying, "Do you think we should let everything go black in the background and make it completely unrealistic or keep a little bit of the presence of the room there?" and I'm saying, "Gosh, I'm not sure. We're going to be going in so close maybe it won't even matter, but hmmm, yes, the limbo thing sounds good, blah, blah." And I walk away



from him and a little bit later he decides that it should all go black in the background and he's absolutely right. So then the scene goes to the editor, Craig McKay. Craig is a wonderful editor who I've worked with on many movies starting with "Melvin and Howard". The first time I saw the scene as it is in the movie—this long, long, dialogue scene—Craig had edited it exactly like that. The performances had "spoken" to him and as he always says, "That face spoke". He just put it together and we never changed anything. That's part of my philosophy—you've got to really fight to work with the best people you possible can on whatever kind of film you're doing. It will only be as good as you can dream it up unless you surround yourself with people who can dream up even better stuff. As I see my work improving, I notice that I'm working with very, very picky people on both sides of the camera. I can't think of anything yet about the scenes with Jodie because the moment happens so fast. I hate long talks with actors. I never really talk to the actors before the movie about my vision of their character or my vision of the story or anything like that. They read the script. I read the script. I've got to know that the actors are the kind of actors who take full responsibility for their characters and have great confidence because I'm very preoccupied with getting the story straight and trying to make sure the camera is in the right place at the right time. I don't want to have to be worrying about . . . I don't want anyone . . . I hate it if an actor asks, you know, "Where was I born?" or "Do you think I ever worked in a restaurant?" I just say, "Would it be good if you did?" and they say, "Yes" and I say, "Then you did." So I don't like to talk about that kind of stuff. I just like to go

out on the set in the morning, have the actors come out before they have their makeup on and stumble through a rehearsal. I couldn't care less about performance at that stage of the game. I know they're going to be good because they're wonderful actors. We need to get it on film, not when we arrive on the set in the morning. We simply try to find blocking that the actors feel comfortable with because the actors have to feel comfortable. How else can they do this superhuman, extraordinary thing of transcending the embarrassment and mortification that comes with pretending something in front of everybody? I do love to rehearse on film because I'm terrified of the idea of getting it right when there is no film rolling. I'm not sure it happens that often—in fact, maybe in my life it still hasn't happened—but I still believe that surely, every once in a great while, there must be something special that happens the first or second time while the actor's discovery is completely fresh. So I'm always trying to get that on film. I still don't want to talk to the actors very much because I'm afraid I'll say too much or say the wrong thing and I have to try not to think about my fear of saying the wrong thing and instead try to get lost in the performance. If it's got some spots that aren't as strong as the others, then I'll race in and say something as if I was some moviegoer who had wandered in off the street. I'll say something like, "I didn't believe that moment." I've also learned never to stand there and wait for the actor to say, "I see . . . You're right." It's hard enough to criticize them, so I just say whatever I have to say then turn around and slink away. And then you do another take. And even if it's, in my view, awful or so hammy or just so lifeless, I'll still say, "Cut. Fantastic!" And I mean that on a very real level. It's a hideous task to try to achieve some kind of reality

through utter fabrication. My God, they were out there trying to pretend something into reality. Wonderful! But then I say, "Hmmm, maybe we should do it a whole completely different way just as a reference point." You have to protect everybody from being humiliated or embarrassed or made to feel like they're not doing their work. And then, finally, almost every scene gets to be pretty good and if you're working with really gifted actors and if the text has any merit, it will hopefully get to be really good. And every once in a while it might get great. That's how I like to work with actors.

Question: I saw "The Silence of the Lambs" and some of the aspects you were talking about concerning Jodie Foster really didn't interest me simply because it was very Hollywood to me. However, the moments in the film that somehow glorify the superhuman abilities of serial killers and show how Americans create a mythology behind them interested me very much. For example, Lector had these religious overtones and I think we give that to serial killers in America. I think it's wrong and I don't know why we have to do that.

Jonathan: You mustn't make me responsible for America glorifying serial killers. I made a film.

Question: Isn't that part of it?

Jonathan: I'm totally with you in your interpretation because that is real for you. To you, the movie glorified serial killers.

Question: No, no, no. I'm saying that we as Americans tend to do that. I just saw Charles Manson on "Hard Copy".

Jonathan: What I think you're talking about in a larger sense is America's obsession with serial killers. I did some interviews in connection with "The Silence of the Lambs" and this question constantly came up with the European press. I feel like serial killers are able to strike terror into the hearts of all of us because we know that all of our lives are, in a funny way, very much at their mercy. Perhaps, in different way, Dan Quayle and George Bush are on that level. On one hand, I don't trust George Bush and Dan Quayle, and on the other hand, any one of us could be the next victim of a serial killer. These are very immediate figures of terror, certainly in my life. I'd rather not think about any of them because if I think about them long enough, I'm going to be frightened by them. And I know from my children that at a very, very young age all of us stop being interested in Peter Rabbit and get interested in stories that have witches and ghouls and other scary figures. Who knows why? Even as you're learning the whole phenomenon of storytelling, the idea of being scared by stories becomes a special kind of favorite for many people. I loved horror movies when I was growing up. I feel there's a certain kind of catharsis available from being truly terrified by

a movie. I know that when I see something like "Aliens" or "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" or "The Exorcist", I actually squirm and make noises and come out feeling better. Maybe I get so much anxiety and dread built up in me that I think a scary movie is a wonderful kind of tonic. I think many of us do this throughout the course of the week because of what we hear on the news, what happens to our family and friends and what we read in the newspapers. There are so many dreadful things going on. I think that serial killers are in a tradition that includes Dracula and anything that scares us—ideas and people, real or imagined. The appalling thing is that serial killers are now the subject of a lot of TV specials and movies. They are a very real problem in this country and in many other countries and it's directly related to child abuse. I wish that "The Silence of the Lambs" had the time to get into this issue, but unfortunately, regrettably, it didn't. Every serial killer is someone who has suffered a profoundly abused childhood and although many abused children turn out to be unbelievably sensitized wonderful people, serial killers go the other way. What was done to them was so grievous that they hate themselves and hate everybody else, too. This is an oversimplification, so please don't nail me on that, but in broad strokes there's a certain kind of truth to it. And as long as we live in a society that tolerates child abuse, as this society does, we're going to have more and more serial killers. Zillions of little instances of abuse that adults lay on children day after day after day go unreported, uncontested, unchallenged. We tolerate child abuse not only in the privacy of homes—we even practice child abuse on a whole societal level. We tolerate entire neighborhoods in all cities where people and their children live, for example, in the Robert Taylor homes, and are treated with total indifference by the people who run this city. These kids are being abused on an almost genocidal level and we wind up with more and more people growing up wanting to kill other people. Are serial killers being glorified? I don't see how they're being glorified. Are they fascinating? Yes. I'm sorry, I'm going on much too much about this.

Tony: What frightens you today in America as a man in the midst of a very confusing time?

Jonathan: What frightens me more than anything—and there's so much to be frightened about—is the backsliding and proliferation of prejudices in this country. We know so much better than to allow the kind of prejudice that is flourishing to even exist anymore. It's heartbreaking, dispiriting and just appalling to me.

Tony: You mentioned your children and the fact that they are reflecting at just three or four years old.

Jonathan: Three, yeah. Right in that realm.

Tony: I'm now trying to understand you philosophically a little bit. Why is it that fascination with death seems to be part of the human spirit?

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Jonathan: I had the good fortune to meet Maurice Sendak last year and he said something that really clicked with me. He said that adults just don't give children credit for their ability to look at and accept almost anything, especially the great mysteries of life. They're always ready to question them and to begin the amazing process of trying to learn something about them over the course of a lifetime. But adults are so backward in our ability to come to terms with this stuff that we don't talk about these things. He said this wonderful thing—it's very vivid to me—about how an adult sees a dead bird lying on the grass and says, "Phew! Come on, let's go this way." But if a child sees a dead bird, they utterly want to go look at it. I have actually had this experience with my oldest child. As Maurice Sendak says, we are just as morbid as they are, but the trouble is that we won't let them go look at it. Most of the time we'll say, "No, no, no. Come here. It's just resting." The child wants to learn a little bit about something, to have a glimpse of that extraordinary fact of life, but the adult who they depend on for guidance says, "No, no," and lies to them about it and perhaps begins the process of making this child as neurotic as many of us are. It's fascinating that kids are ready and it's not going to scar them. It scarred us because we weren't allowed to look at it.

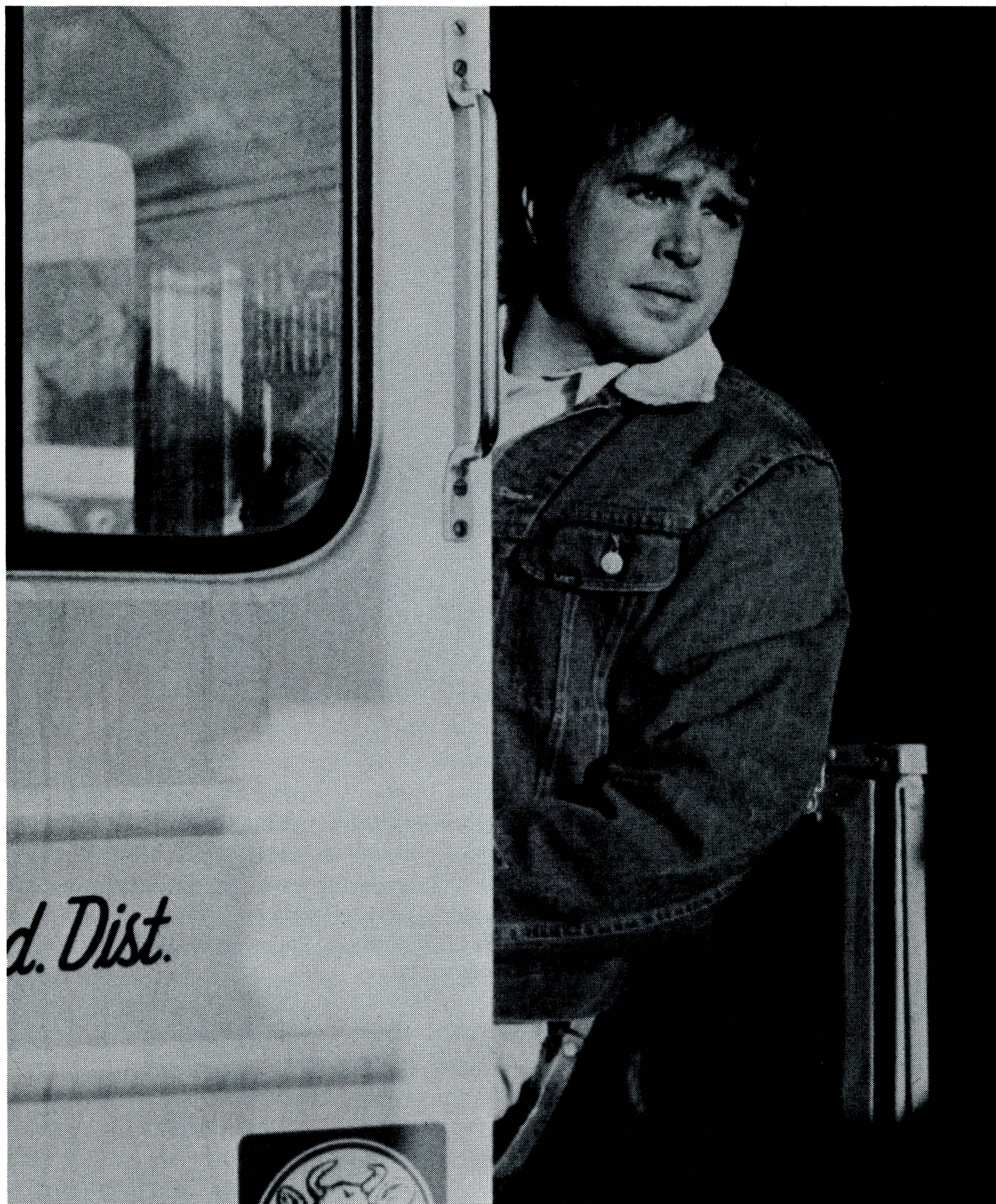
Question: There are many really beautiful, honest and pure moments in your films. Do you hope that many of your audience will see them or do you want to keep them to yourself because you're selfish about it?

Jonathan: No, I'm completely generous. By the way, thank you. I'm glad you see moments like that. I try to pick scripts that show, in one way or another, what I would call the better side of human nature. The idea of trying to capture a moment of true humanity has great appeal for me. I think those are important reference points. I love them in real life and I think they're great in movies, too.

Tony: I think we ought to look at one of these powerful moments. It took a lot of nerve to film a twenty-minute dialogue as the opening scene of "Melvin and Howard". The idea of fate seems to come to rest in many of your films and in your life—meeting Joseph E. Levine, etc. This is a significant moment of life. How do you choose scripts and how did you have the gall to shoot a twenty-minute dialogue framed inside a truck? I mean, nobody would do it.

Jonathan: Well, it goes back again to the idea that if you believe in the text and you've got the right actors to bring it to life, it'll work. You just know it will. I felt that way about "Melvin and Howard". I know it will work for me and that's a start. It excited me on the page and made me truly believe that with the right actors it would be fine and nobody would particularly notice or hopefully wouldn't be thinking about these two guys talking to each other in a truck for twenty minutes. Instead they would be captivated by the actors. By the way, in watching this clip, I can see more than ever before how thrilled Paul LeMat was at the idea

of working with Jason Robards. He just worshipped his words because he had never worked with an actor of Robards' caliber and felt that it was an unbelievable opportunity that validated his whole effort to be an actor. He made himself ill getting ready for this scene and then finally one night we were out there and we did it. As I watch this clip I can see LeMat's pleasure in what Jason Robards was doing. He could barely keep from giggling with delight and I think that translates, to me anyway, into Melvin's delight in people that I think was very effective for the relationship between Melvin and Howard. But I know what was going on there. Paul couldn't believe his eyes. He was in heaven and it was fun. I hope all the filmmakers in the audience noticed that long take at the beginning of the scene. I met Bernardo Bertolucci just before I directed "Caged Heat" and he was introduced to me as somebody who just finished "1900" or something and I was introduced to him as a young director who was about to do his first movie and he said with this kind of twinkle in his eye, "Oh, very good. Are you going to use a lot of long shots?" This filmmaker to filmmaker kind of thing was going on and I said, "Well, certainly, Bernardo!" and Bernardo's wife, Clare Peploe, who is a very gifted filmmaker in her own right, said, "I think Bernardo means long takes." Now that's something Roger Corman would never urge you to do because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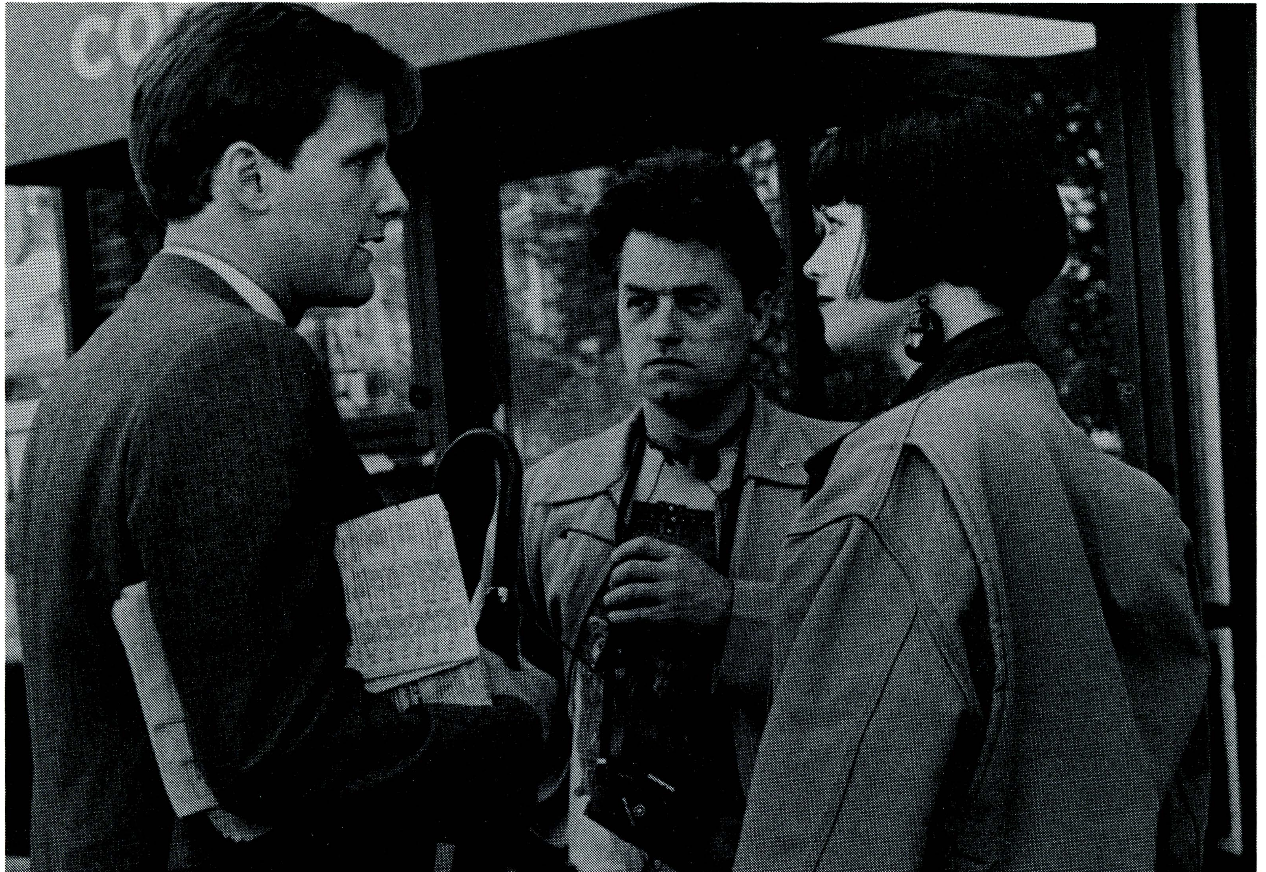
he wants you to be able to edit really fast, but I said, "My God, yes, yes, yes." I have always found that one of the great and terrifying challenges of being a filmmaker is the technique of filming. Should we go for a long take here? Will it play without an edit? And, in that instance, I thought it was a great excuse for a long take because this was the moment that would be contested more and more throughout the film: "Did he really find Howard Hughes?" So I thought we should show every single second of it so we can all say we saw it. We all saw him take a leak, hear a noise and find him. Yes, he's not lying! So that was it. I thought the script was great. I feel that Bo Goldman did something so rare in the history of film, certainly in the last 15 years. He wrote a beautiful, beautiful screenplay. It's just a wonderful piece.

Tony: How do you feel in retrospect about the idea that Melvin's greatest moment in life is the moment he remembers that Howard sang his song? I had a bittersweet kind of feeling at the end of the movie that Melvin won't grow, that Melvin is lost somehow in a dream that can never happen.

Jonathan: I had a very, very different feeling about the ending when Melvin's lawyer tells him after the trial, "Melvin, you did it. You're going to get the money," and Melvin packs up and drives away saying, "No, Melvin Dummar's never going to see the money. But I'll tell you one thing, Howard Hughes sang Melvin Dummar's song." To me, that's a mark of a great gift that Melvin now has. He is no longer the guy who raced around trying to catch up financially with all the ideas that are put into our brains about how much money you're supposed to wind up with. He has come to understand something that I admire a lot—the idea that you'll have a richer life if you value your experiences more than your bank balance. And I love that about the film. That wasn't true of the real Melvin Dummar. I think he's still out trying some great scheme to make some money, but it was the point that I think Bo Goldman wanted to make. I love it. I believe that very much.

Tony: That's beautifully, beautifully said. How about "Something Wild"? Let's roll with "Something Wild".

Jonathan: Well, it's obvious that this one was written by a man. It's a movie. It's a crazy story. I like it because I thought it was fresh and different from most of the other movies and because it was that rarest of things—it was a good script. Sometimes when I'm doing publicity interviews people will ask, "How did you pick this script? How do you pick your subject matter?" A good script. They're so rare. I think there's so much talent for making movies in all areas. There are so many gifted cameramen and editors and actors and a lot of, I think, good directors, too, but what's missing is writers who can write a script that will grip people for 90 minutes. It's just a terrible vacuum. So when I get a script that I enjoy, I'll make it. That's kind of how it goes. I made "Something Wild" because I liked it.



Tony: Let me quote you on something from your distant past: "I think women are better people by and large."

Jonathan: Well, I'm sure we all agree on that.

Tony: Well, tell us what that's about.

Jonathan: This, of course, has nothing to do with the cinema.

Tony: Yes it does because you are choosing to make these films.

Jonathan: Well, there are two genders, female and male, and I just noticed which gender tends to arm themselves and go to war under the guidance of other members of their gender and shoot strangers and I noticed which gender tends to populate the streets prepared to do damage to other people in order to take their money and I noticed which gender tends to leap at each other and start punching and kicking and biting and stabbing in bars when they look

strangely at each other. And I noticed which gender tends to display a general absence of that bellicosity which I just don't think is what humans should be all about at this moment in history. I think there should be a lot less of that kind of violence and a lot more of the kind of sensitive approach to life—and I mean sensitive in the strongest sense of the word—that the female gender tends to exhibit. I just think that all of the true human values are present in spades in women and that men clearly fall short. And I think the extent that women tolerate the animalistic nature of men is deplorable. That could be their fatal flaw, you know. They should just tell the men, "Nuts with you guys." I think that men have a tremendous amount to learn from women.

Question: You mentioned the difficulty in finding good scripts. How is it to work with writers in the course of a production and are you working with any writers now?

Jonathan: I have been working with several writers since we finished "Something Wild" because we felt that it would be such a shame to have to start searching all over again for a script that has a subject and characters and a story that's appealing enough to devote two years of your life to it. Wouldn't it be great to find some really talented writers and a subject that attracts them and get them to work on it? So, I've been doing that. I'm working with Ron Nyswaner on one script and I'm working with Ted Tally, who adapted "The Silence of the Lambs", on another script and I'm working with John Sayles on a third script and I've just started working with Bob Herbert, a wonderful journalist from New York, on yet another script. But I've swiftly discovered over the course of the past few months of work that it's ludicrous to work on so many scripts at once. Scripts, just by definition, should be worked on one at a time and I'm now trying to focus a little more. I think if you have too many good ideas you wind up worrying about your schedule instead of worrying about your material. But more than anything I have to say that "The Silence of the Lambs" has turned out very well and I can now admit that I think the most beautiful times are when you can kind of kick back and just enjoy life a little bit and not do anything. So my big ambition right now is to try to avoid serious work for a while and have fun with my kids in the family zone. This scriptwriting thing is unbelievably difficult.

Question: What script are you working on with John Sayles?

Jonathan: John Sayles is adapting a book called "Fatal Voyage". It's about the Indianapolis, the US Navy vessel that went down in the final days of World War II without being able to get off an SOS. A thousand men wound up in the water with no one on their way to rescue them and, over the course of the four or five days before they were discovered, their numbers were whittled down to about 200 people. It brought out the best and the worse in men. What did they do when they got in the water? Within twelve hours, hundreds and hundreds of the men were killing each other. They had had it and started killing each other. Now

maybe that would have happened if a thousand women went into the water, too. I don't know, but somehow I don't think so. It's a story of great heroism and great horror. I think it shows the gamut of what men are capable of and I have to admit that, from time to time, it does include generosity, heroism and other good things.

Tony: Tell us about some of the movies that have been important to you.

Jonathan: There was a six- or seven-part movie called "Far from Vietnam" in the late '60s that I will always hold dear because of a segment made by Alain Resnais. It dealt with a French intellectual—a potentially boring situation—with Yves Montand pacing back and forth in a room for 15 or 20 minutes talking to probably Simone Signoret about how confused he was. As a Frenchman who loved Americans because American soldiers had liberated Paris from the Nazis, he had always thought he'd love Americans forever, but he now thinks that Americans shouldn't be in Vietnam. He went on and on in a very, very interesting way and changed my feelings about the war in Vietnam. A change occurred in my consciousness. Whether it was a good change or not is irrelevant. A lot of the time we all get excited about movies, but they can't really change anything. "The China Syndrome" didn't change anything in terms of nuclear power plants although it should have. But it certainly sparked people into a certain kind of awareness. "Far from Vietnam" changed at least one person's way of thinking and that compels me to continue to be interested in films that contain ideas that have some kind of depth without getting away from entertainment.

Tony: Thanks very much.

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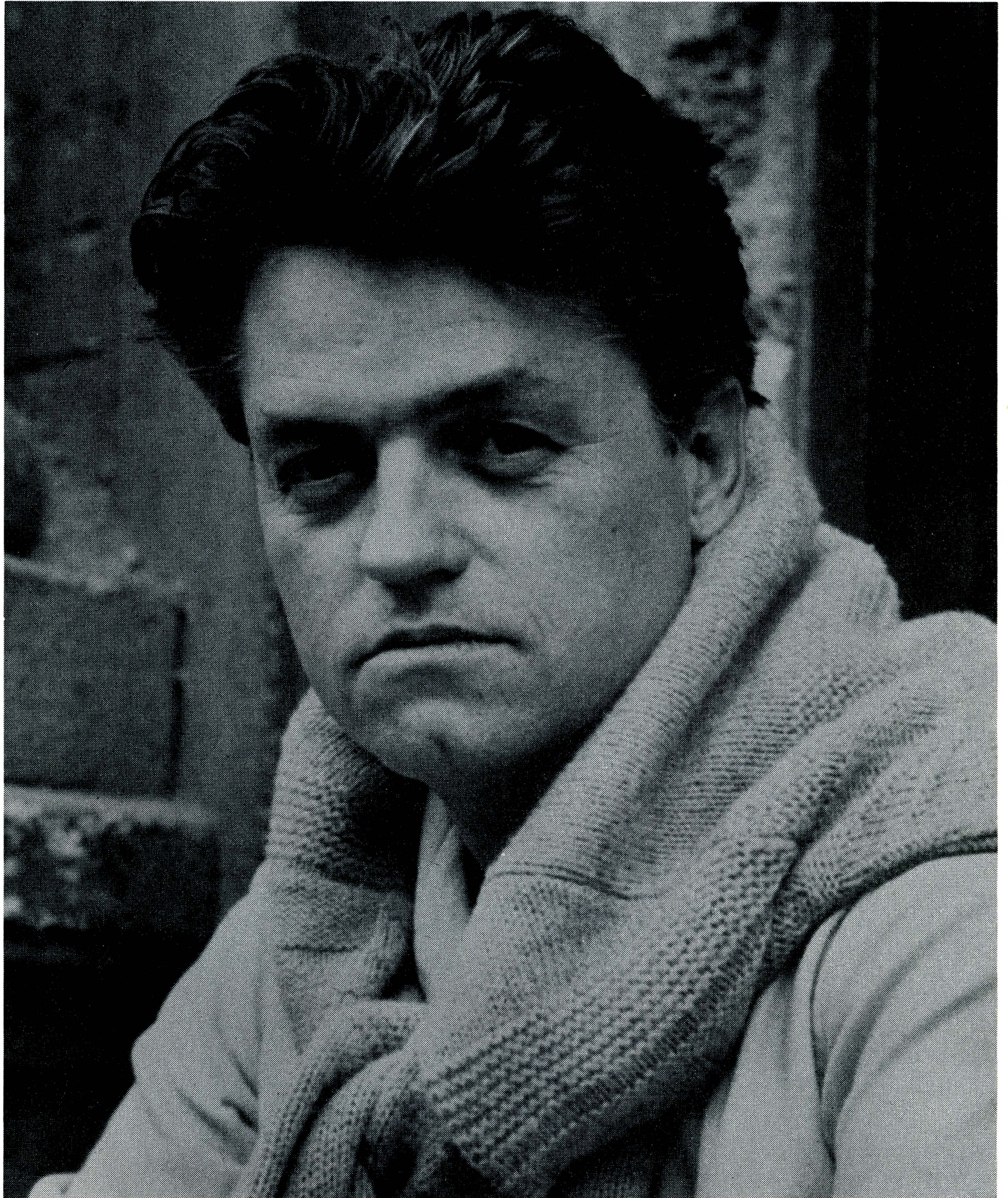

Jonathan Demme's Directing Credits:

Caged Heat 1974
Renegade Girls 1974
Crazy Mama 1975
Fighting Mad 1976
Citizen's Band (Handle with Care) 1977
Last Embrace 1978
Melvin and Howard 1980
Who am I This Time? 1982 (PBS teleplay)
Swingshift 1984
Stop Making Sense 1984
Something Wild 1986
Swimming to Cambodia 1987
Haiti: Dreams of Democracy 1987 (documentary)
Married to the Mob 1988
The Silence of the Lambs 1991
(Winner of Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Acress, Best Adaptation)

A FILM BY JONATHAN DEMME AND TALKING HEADS

PRODUCED BY GARY GOETZMAN

DIRECTED BY JONATHAN DEMME

CONCEIVED FOR THE SCREEN BY DAVID BYRNE

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER GARY KURFIRST

EDITED BY LISA DAY

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JORDAN CRONENWETH

VISUAL CONSULTANT SANDY McLEOD

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Mr. Demme's interview was conducted as part of the 16th Annual Festival of Illinois Film & Video Artists which was funded in part by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council.

This monograph was produced by the Department of Film & Video, Columbia College Chicago, sponsor of the Festival of Illinois Film & Video Artists.

Festival Director: Anthony Loeb
Editor, Designer: Gina Richardson
Associate Festival Director: Lisa M.R. Formosa
Printing Services Director: Gordon Bieberle
Typesetter: Anita Strejc
Photographer: Pam Susemiehl
Film stills courtesy of Scott E. Marks

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