





SHANE BLACK IN FRONT OF HIS BUNGALOW.

Onyx

# MILLION-DOLLAR BABIES



HOW A BUNCH OF HOLLYWOOD SCREENWRITERS STRUCK IT RICH

BY JEANIE KASINDORF

**T**HEY ARE HOLLYWOOD'S NEW \$1-million boys: ten screenwriters who over the past ten months have sold original screenplays in deals that will earn them at least \$1 million. In a city where multi-million-dollar deals for actors and directors have long been commonplace, these new million-dollar deals for writers have become the talk of the town. When Shane Black, 28, sold *The Last Boy Scout* to David Geffen and Warner Bros. for \$1.75 million—believed to be the most ever paid for an original screenplay—the *Los Angeles Times* ran the story on the front page.

What does it take to write a \$1-million screenplay? If these ten writers are any indication, it helps to be a man. It helps to have gone to film school. Only three never went near a film school—but two have been making movies since they were of college age. And it helps to have the same commercial taste as the moviegoing public. "I'm

lucky in that my tastes seem to agree with the general population's," says Shane Black. "The job of a screenwriter is to write what he wants to see on the screen."

It also helps to have written an action-adventure buddy film. With one exception (a political thriller about an American president and his best friend), the scripts are all "boy stories"—a World War II drama about a "platoon of guys"; a buddy story about an old detective and his protégé; the Robin Hood legend recast as a buddy story; the saga of a sentient robot and his scientist buddy; and the story of two abused brothers who create a fantasy world to escape their real life. (The last film, by David Mickey Evans, 27, was the first project bought by Peter Guber and Jon Peters after they took over Columbia Pictures. Trying to keep a tight wrap on what will be their debut film, they are refusing to let Evans discuss the movie until it is released.)

Why do action-adventure films command top dollar? Get 100 people in a

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHILIP SALTONSTALL

## MILLION-DOLLAR BABIES

room and put a comedian up in front of them, the story in Hollywood goes, and only a certain percentage of the people are going to laugh. Have somebody run onstage and pull out a gun and you can bet all 100 people will duck under the tables. The point of this story is that action-adventure films are more universal and can be sold more easily in every corner of the world.

"Ever since the \$500-million Guber-Peters deal at Columbia," says Peter Dekom, one of the leading entertainment lawyers in Los Angeles, "everyone is looking for more money. Five years ago, these scripts would have commanded \$100,000 to \$400,000. Now if someone has a good concept and if word is leaked out in just the right way from their agents, it provokes a bidding war. All you have to do is have one company bidding more than another company and the price skyrockets."

The deals are not all for a simple \$1 million in exchange for one script. David Mickey Evans's \$1-million contract includes a fee for directing his film. Most of the others include a \$250,000 producer's fee, which Dekom calls "nothing more than a way to disguise part of the writer's fee." Some also involve complicated contracts that guarantee the screenwriters \$1 million and more if they write a second script for the studio.

Some studio chiefs are grouching about the new prices. "I don't want to see this story in the *Wall Street Journal*," one studio chief told an agent after he made a \$1-million deal. "It's completely out of hand," said David Hoberman, head of Disney's Touchstone Pictures, the day after the Shane Black sale.

But writers say they are only beginning to get their fair share. "I don't think the prices are exorbitant at all considering film budgets," says Rick Jaffa, who co-wrote *Hell Bent . . . And Back*, the first of the new crop of films to be sold in a \$1-million deal. "Actors and directors are paid \$4- and \$5 million for a film and set up financially for life off a character that someone else created. Although the actor and director certainly bring a lot to that creation, and sometimes even change it so that it's a lot better, it still seems unfair that the writer has always earned so little. Those of us who have made these deals are the fortunate ones. The number of people in the Writers Guild who make a good living is unfortunately incredibly small. [In fact, Writers Guild statistics show that only 50 percent of its members earn any income in a given year, and

among those who earned something, the median income was about \$50,000]. Paying \$1 million for a screenplay for a \$30- or \$40-million film is certainly worth it. As far as the writers go, it's about time."

### SHANE BLACK



**I**CAN'T COMPREHEND THE FACT THAT I make money, in any field. In the back of my mind, I'm still a student indulging a hobby, and pretty soon I'm going to have to figure out what to do with my life."

Shane Black, the \$1.75-million man, is sitting in the living room of the run-down stucco bungalow he shares with four roommates. The room is decorat-

didn't work out. I'm much too insecure. After I graduated, I went to my parents and said, 'Look, I think I want to try writing.' And they said, 'Okay, for six months we'll help you pay your bills.' And I think in the back of their minds they thought, If he fails he can come back and start something that's a real job.

"I have a group of friends I met in college, the same people I've known now for probably ten years. They're mostly screenwriters. And we formed our little band, which we called Pad o' Guys, and lived in a house we called the Pad." In 1984, one of the Guys, Fred Dekker, who was working on a version of *Godzilla*, introduced Black to his agent, David Greenblatt. "I took him the first script I wrote, a piece called *Shadow Company*," Black says. "It is a very strange cross between *The Exorcist* and *Platoon*. It is about missing-in-action soldiers who haunt their families after the war is over. The script got me meetings with all these development people who at the time I thought were gods. Then you find out that development people, for the most part, they're scum. But at the time I was just so impressed that I was in an office with people who were in the movie business."

Twentieth Century Fox hired Black to rewrite a science-fiction epic called *The Last Warriors*. But when interest in a script he'd written called "Lethal Weapon" heated up, he left. Warner Bros. bought the script for \$250,000 up front and another \$150,000 when the film was produced. *Lethal Weapon* grossed \$65 million in the United States.

When it came time to make *Lethal Weapon 2*, Black was hired to do the script. "I hated it," he says, "hated, hated it. I was burned out at this point and sweating ideas. It was not a good time. After six months, I jumped ship. Scared rabbit, didn't want to make changes, didn't think I could. Jeff Boam came in and did a good job. I regret that if I'd stayed on the project"—the film grossed \$150 million—"I would have made a lot of money. I got paid \$250,000 for the first and split that with [co-writer] Warren Murphy. I would have made \$200,000 as a passive payment for the rights of the characters if I'd sat on my hands. Because I spent six months agonizing and writing the damn thing, I made \$125,000."

For two years, Black bummed around his house, traveled to Mexico, hung out with his friends, and wrote nothing. "I



### EXPLOSION

"WHAT IF A NUCLEAR BOMB BECAME SENTIENT?"

ed with a sofa covered in orange flowered vinyl, an old green leather chair, and posters advertising Bugle Boy, Esprit, and Cherokee sportswear. The open windows have no screens, so bugs buzz in circles around the center of the room. Outside, the roommates' dusty old cars, including Black's 1987 white Mustang GT, are parked on the small front lawn in front of cans and boxes overflowing with garbage.

Shane Black was raised in Pittsburgh and moved to Southern California with his family in the late seventies. He enrolled at UCLA as a theater-arts major. "I wanted to be an actor," he says, "but it

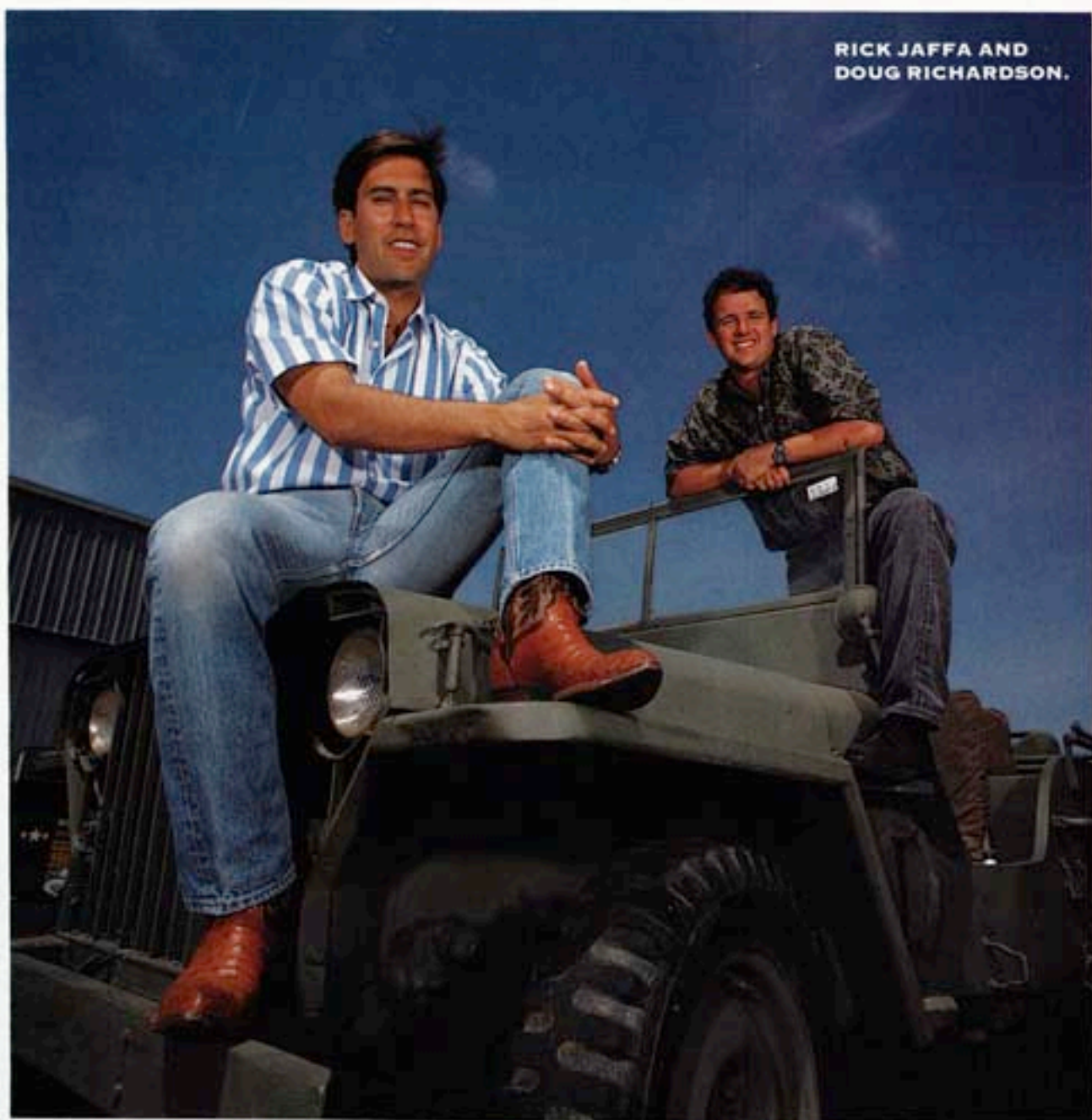
was starting to really fritz out around the edges," he says, "and get really neurotic." Finally, last December, he started to write *The Last Boy Scout*.

"The idea was one I had back in 1986 or '87," he says. "I even pitched it to Joel Silver"—the producer with whom Black worked on *Lethal Weapon*. "I told him it was a movie called *Die Hard*, and later, when they needed a title for the Bruce Willis film, they used *Die Hard*. The original idea was to do a buddy film about an old, tough, grouchy private eye who knows every trick in the book. And let's give him a sidekick who's a young hot-shot kid who wants to be a detective. It ended up as a story of a down-on-his-luck private eye who teams up with an ex-football great to track down a murderer. It's a real raunchy character piece, set in Los Angeles."

On a Monday morning in early April, Black took the script to David Greenblatt at InterTalent Agency. On Tuesday, Greenblatt and his partner, Bill Block, met with Black's lawyer to come up with a strategy. Meanwhile, the agents started calling people up, working up a feeding frenzy by telling everyone that finally there was a new Shane Black script ready to see.

When Black left Fox to write *Lethal Weapon*, the studio negotiated an agreement that they would have first bid, last refusal on the next original Shane Black script. So the agents sent the script to Fox on Thursday night. On Monday, Fox bid \$850,000. Greenblatt and Block told Black they thought they could get more. "Okay," he said, "go for it."

Late Monday morning, the script went out around town. By the afternoon, according to sources familiar with the deal, there were several offers over \$1 million. At eleven Monday night, Eric Eisner, president of the David Geffen Company, called and offered \$1.25-. He wanted to make the top bid and take everybody out by Tuesday morning. But others were willing to go higher. Carolco and Tri-Star offered \$1.25 million, then \$1.5-, then \$1.6-. By Tuesday night, Geffen, which had been joined by Warner Bros., had upped its offer to \$1.75-, and Carolco and Tri-Star were saying they would go as high as \$2- to \$2.5- million.



RICK JAFFA AND DOUG RICHARDSON.



## PLAY TIME

"WE WOULD ENACT MOMENTS OF THE FILM," SAID JAFFA. "IT WAS LIKE BEING KIDS AGAIN."

While this was going on, Black sat at home in a big chair and read detective novels. "I was very happy to let them do what they do, and occasionally answer the phone," he says. "That's the lovely position I'm in, because this is a fantasy to me."

Finally, on Tuesday night, Black decided to accept the \$1.75 million offered by Geffen and Warner Bros. instead of the \$2.5 million he could have gotten from Carolco and Tri-Star. Geffen and Warner Bros. had a deal with Joel Silver. He felt better going with them. On Wednesday morning, Greenblatt offered the script once more to Fox for the \$1.75 million. They said they would pass.

The deal was done. And Shane Black had walked away from three quarters of a million dollars. "There's an expression that the Satan you know is better than the Satan you don't know," Black says. "I wanted to work with Joel Silver because I think he gets my ideas. And I thought I could deal with the

people at Warner Bros. Not that I would always agree with them, but I could deal with them. It seemed like it would mean the least stress for me. Whether it's worth what I gave up, I don't know. But what the f---. It's all Monopoly money."

## BRIAN HELGELAND AND MANNY COTO



I WAS ON THE PHONE WITH MANNY right before I went home to Massachusetts for Christmas," says Brian Helgeland, "and as a joke, I said, 'Let's not hang up the phone until we come up with an idea that we can sell for \$1 million.' Nobody believes it now, but it's true. I was just joking around. We got to talking about nuclear bombs, and Manny said, 'What if a nuclear bomb became sen-

tient?' And we started to roll with the idea for *The Ticking Man*. In an hour, we had the main characters and the whole premise of the movie. And I said, 'We really are going to sell this for \$1 million.'"

Brian Helgeland and Manny Coto, both 29, are two film-school graduates who last March sold *The Ticking Man* to producer Larry Gordon (*Die Hard*, *Predator*, *48 HRS.*, *Field of Dreams*) for \$1 million. Helgeland, a tall blond man who combines a low-key New England charm with a Hollywood sense of self-promotion, was raised in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He majored in English at Southeastern Massachusetts University, then went to work as a scallop fisherman, which his father had been before him. "I always liked films a lot," he says, "but it never really occurred to me that I could make a living at it. Then one day around Thanksgiving of 1985, we were in real heavy seas out in the Atlantic. That day, we took some real big rolls on the boat, and I was just hanging on, swinging back and forth on the two-ton dredges that, if you slip between them on the wet deck, can crush your feet. That night, I went back to my bunk and said, 'I think I should at least attempt to find a new line of work.'"

Helgeland applied to study film at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. In his first semester, he wrote a comedy for a screenwriting class about a group of senior citizens who become urban terrorists to try to keep their building from being turned into a condominium. It won second place in a national screenwriting competition. "The Los Angeles Times ran a picture of the winners. So I made a bunch of photocopies and wrote this joke underneath about needing an agent and sent it to almost 70 agents. Out of all of them I got only one call, from Joel Millner." Helgeland co-wrote a horror comedy called *976-EVIL*, for which he and a partner split \$105,000. He was paid \$70,000 to write *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4*. Then he got \$275,000 for *Highway to Hell*, a teenage-comedy version of the Orpheus story, starring Chad Lowe,

that will be released in the fall. He was on the set of *976-EVIL* when Millner introduced him to Coto, another of his clients.

Coto, who is in Israel directing *Cover Up*, a political thriller starring Dolph Lundgren, was born in Havana and came to Orlando, Florida, with his parents when he was seven months old. "I've wanted to make movies since I was fourteen," Coto says. "I made short films with my dad's Super 8 movie camera and a little Super 8 editor, dumb little stories about monsters. One was called *Flesh*. It was about a human hand that comes to life out of the attic and kills the children and the baby-sitter. It starred my little

minute murder mystery called *Twist*. That film got him accepted into the prestigious directors' program at the American Film Institute. There he shot a 22-minute film called *Jack in the Box*, about a witch who gives a little girl a jack-in-the-box that comes to life and tries to kill her family.

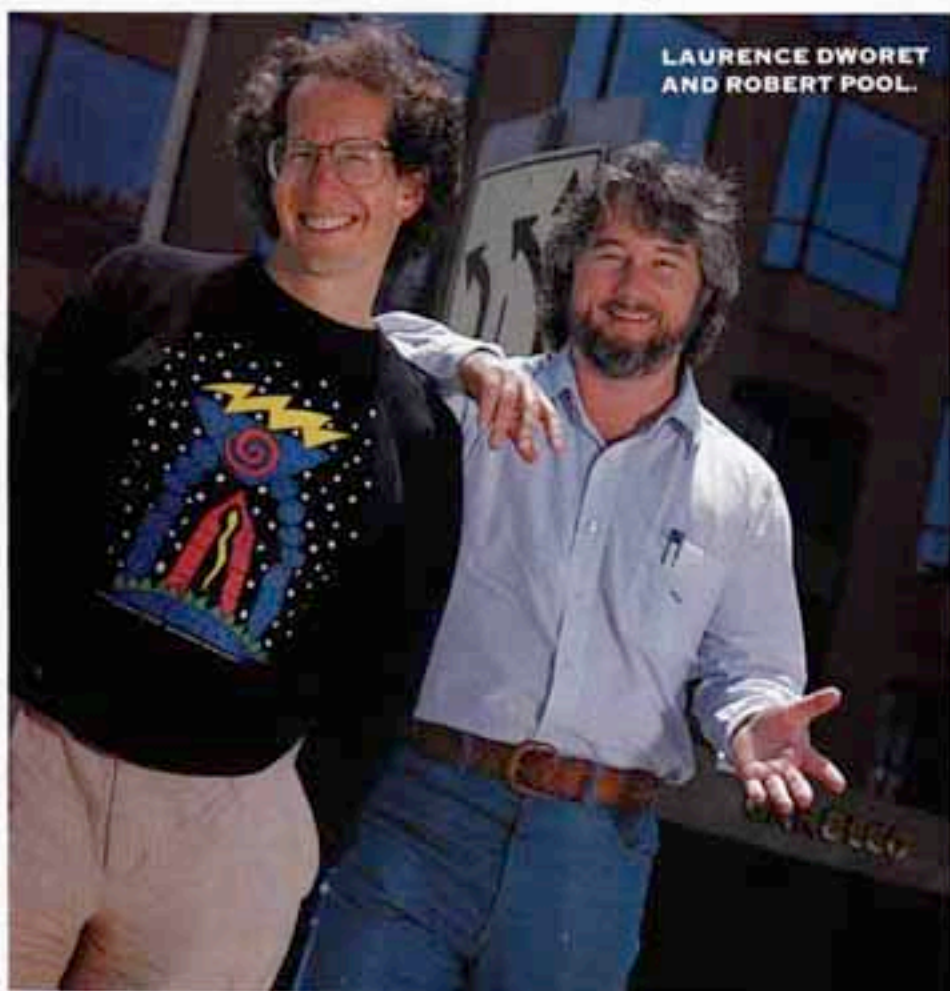
Helgeland and Coto teamed up in October 1989. "We wrote a horror comedy called *Freuds*," Helgeland says. "The basic premise is that insanity is caused by invisible creatures which eat your sanity. Nothing happened with it, so we decided we had to get out of horror films. Since no one would hire us to write anything else, we knew we had to write a spec script."

Helgeland and his wife and infant son went home to New Bedford for Christmas, and Coto and his wife went home to Orlando. When they got back, they started writing *The Ticking Man*.

"The basic premise of the movie," Helgeland says, "is that it's five years into the future and we have negotiated a big disarmament treaty with the Russians. There's this top-secret project out in the desert called the Ticking Man Project. The government has developed a robot who looks and acts like a normal person but who has a nuclear war-head planted in his chest. They've decided to dismantle him, but what no one realizes is that the ticking man is now thinking for himself. So before they can dismantle him, he escapes and tries to go to Moscow to explode himself. So the government brings in our hero. Bruce Willis has been signed to play him. He's a genius who worked on the project for the government and became friends with the robot.

From then on, the movie is a big chase with Willis trying to stop the ticking man."

Helgeland and Coto took the script to Joel Millner, at Triad Artists Agency, the second week in March. "I had this idea we should send ticking clocks to everybody as a forerunner to the script," Helgeland says. "So the week before, we sent twenty alarm clocks that Manny actually painted with a shadowy sort of figure casting a big long shadow. In the chest of the figure you can see a clock ticking. We set all the alarms to go off at four o'clock that afternoon and we



LAURENCE DORET AND ROBERT POOL.

## VINDICATION

FOR TEN YEARS, ALMOST EVERY STUDIO TURNED THE SCRIPT DOWN.



brother and sister, but the dramatic moment was spoiled 'cause my brother couldn't stop laughing in his death scene."

Coto studied at Loyola University in New Orleans. "It was halfway to California," he says, "which was as far west as my parents would let me go." As soon as he graduated, he moved to Los Angeles and got a job as a production assistant for Noel Marshall, who had been a producer on *The Exorcist*. He persuaded Marshall's wife, Tippi Hedren, to star in a twenty-



## NOTHING ATTRACTS LIKE THE IMP



CORIANDER SEEDS FROM MOROCCO



ANGELICA ROOT FROM SAXONY



JUNIPER BERRIES FROM ITALY



CASSIA BARK FROM INDOCHINA

heard stories about these clocks going off in meetings. Then people were calling to complain they didn't get clocks.

"That was a Thursday. The following Tuesday, we sent the script out at eleven in the morning. By eight o'clock, we had sold it. We're guaranteed the million even if the film doesn't get made."

The night the \$1-million deal was made, Helgeland was at home watching *RoboCop* and Coto was in a film lab in Hollywood. "Joel and Manny celebrated by meeting each other for dinner at Barney's Beanery," Helgeland says, "but I was baby-sitting, so I had to pass."

### DOUG RICHARDSON AND RICK JAFFA



**I** THINK IN MY HEART I ALWAYS really wanted to be in the film business," says Rick Jaffa, 34, who grew up in De Soto, Texas. "But if you grow up in a place like Texas, you can really push that back and not pursue it. So I went to business school at the University of Southern California and had a few corporate job offers but realized the only job I wanted was in the film business. A friend of mine encouraged me to try to get into the mailroom at William Morris. He

said that it would be a good place to start. He said, 'Why don't you try to figure out someone you know at the place?'

"So I literally lay in bed at night thinking, Who do I know, who do I know? Finally I remembered that three years before, a friend of mine at Southern Methodist University had been to L.A. on her spring break and been set up on a blind date with a guy in the mailroom at William Morris. I called her up. She didn't even remember his name. She finds the girl who fixed her up and calls me back and says, 'I've got his name.' So I just call and ask for this guy, not knowing whether he's in the mailroom or he's the head of the company. His name is Sam Haskell, and he had become an agent. I don't think he even remembered who this girl was. I bugged him and bugged him and eventually he took the call and said, 'If I see you, will you just stop calling me?' He was a terrific guy. He's from a small town in Mississippi, and we hit it off. So he took me down to personnel. We walked in with southern accents, and I think they figured we grew up together. So I started three weeks later. Two hundred dollars a week in the mailroom and I was ecstatic."

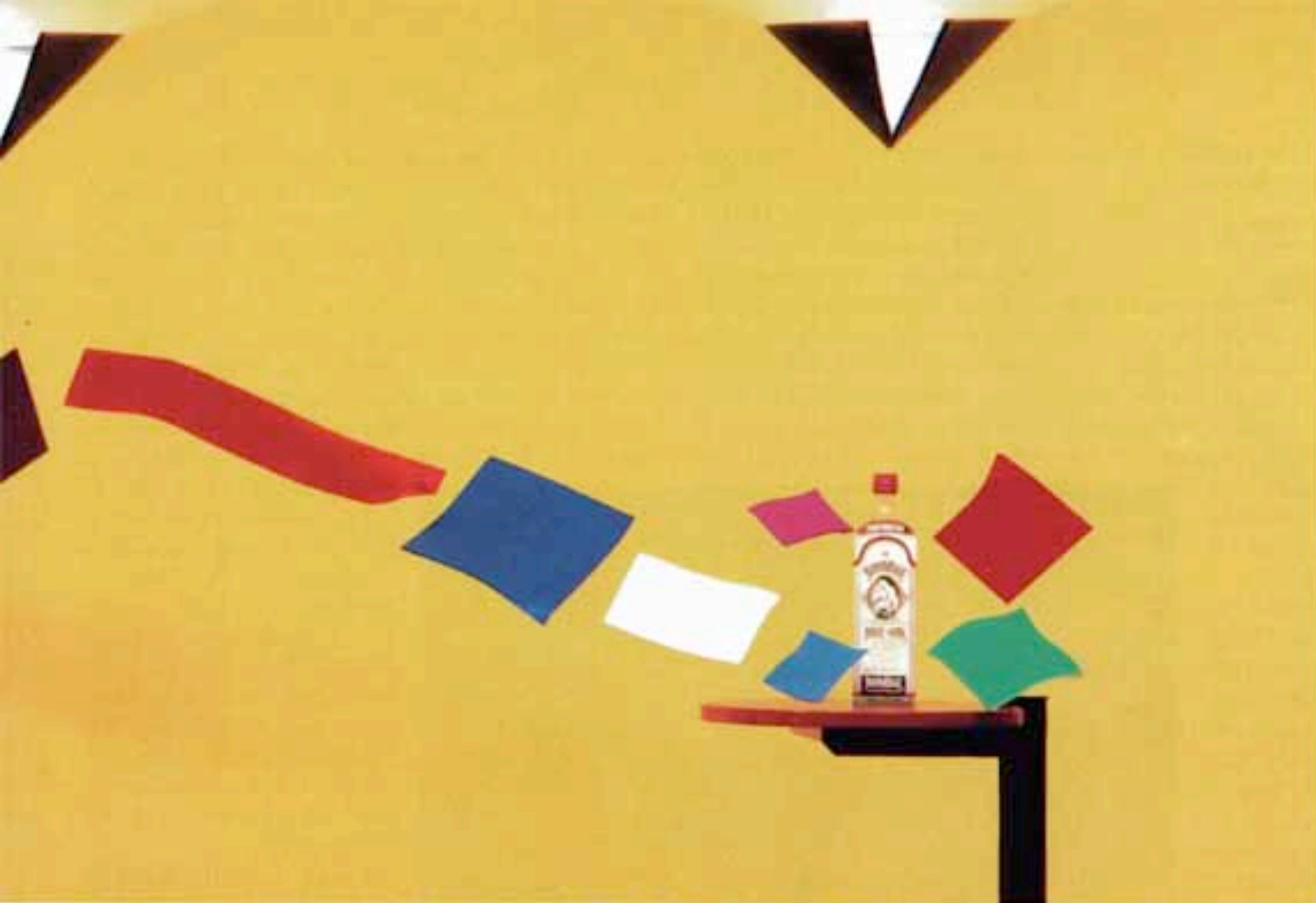
In 1983, two years after starting in the mailroom, Jaffa became an agent. In 1986, he signed up a young screenwriter named Doug Richardson, not knowing that three years later the two would make Hollywood

history when they sold *Hell Bent . . . And Back* to Disney in a \$1-million deal.

Richardson, 31, had been raised in the small town of Loomis, California, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. "I came to USC film school saying I wanted to be a director. When I graduated, I worked for an education-film company in San Diego, then decided that wasn't taking me into Hollywood. So I quit my job and moved into a small apartment in Hollywood and started writing screenplays."

Richardson wrote a script about California politics that got him a development deal with producer Bob Shapiro at Warner Bros. "No one knew who I was, so they could get me for 50 cents," he says. "It was around guild scale, \$1,000 a week, but at that time it was more money than there was in the entire world to me." He wrote *Honor Bright*, a film about "a bunch of guys in the Navy"; *Telegraph Road*, a film about a corrupt college-basketball coach; *Salsa*, a love story set in East Harlem; *Pravda*, the story of a Soviet journalist; and the first draft on *Die Hard* 2. None of the films except *Die Hard* #2 were ever produced.

For some time, Jaffa had been teasing Richardson about a great idea he had for a screenplay. "The idea was really an extension of what I did as a kid," Jaffa says. "I was constantly going out to the pasture and liberating Italy and France. I thought,



## ORTED TASTE OF BOMBAY GIN.

ALMONDS FROM INDOCHINA    LEMON PEEL FROM SPAIN    ORRIS (IRIS ROOT) FROM ITALY    LICORICE FROM INDOCHINA

© 1988 Carillon Importers, Ltd., Teaneck, N.J. 86 Proof • 100% grain neutral spirits.

What if a group of guys during World War II who had been together a long time had become rogues? And they decide to do something that's really wrong and immoral and through the course of time are put into a situation where they are faced with a moral dilemma. They have to choose between their original goal and doing the right thing. I had a pretty vague outline. So we sat down and created a

get home. "The film went out on a Tuesday," Richardson says, "and Ricardo Mestres [head of Disney's Hollywood Pictures] and Jeffrey Katzenberg [Disney's chairman]" made an offer Wednesday morning.

"Our agent, Mike Simpson, who was the best man at Rick's wedding, quickly negotiated the skeleton of the deal and tried to find me. I was at the Dallas-Fort

that all sound horrible. My wife, Amanda, and I listened to these messages and I'm saying, 'My God, I was prepared for it not to sell; I wasn't prepared for my career to be over.' Finally Amanda said, 'Maybe it's a setup; maybe something incredible has happened.' I said, 'No, they wouldn't do that to me.' I couldn't find Doug, 'cause he was on a plane. So I called Mike's office. His assistant, who deserves an Academy Award, said, 'Listen, I can't really talk; Mike's in a meeting at Warner Bros., but he wants you to come right in.' I said, 'Look, I've been up 30 hours, I've been out of the country two and a half weeks, what's up?' He said, 'Well, I've been out sick, so I'm not sure, but I think it's really what's down.'

"I said, 'What's down?!' I got really angry with him. I said, 'Transfer me to Crabbe [Jim Crabbe, an agent].'" So Jim gets on the phone, puts his hand over his mouth, and whispers, 'Look, I'm in a meeting, I can't really talk, it's very sensitive. We've been friends a long time, so you're going to have to trust me on this. It will all work out.' I showered; I drove to William Morris. It was the longest car ride of my life. They called me up into a room, a whole bunch of them. And they had a video camera hidden in a box. Mike says, 'We've got a problem. We've got a real problem. How are you going to spend all your money?'"

### POPCORN

IT HELPS TO HAVE THE SAME KIND OF COMMERCIAL TASTE AS THE MOVIEGOER.



bunch of characters together and then wrote the film. We would sit and literally enact moments of the film together and had a blast. It was like being kids again."

They finished the script in August 1989, shortly before Jaffa—who had left William Morris to become an executive at Weintraub Entertainment—was due to get married and leave for a honeymoon in Tahiti. They decided to send it out to producers the day before he was scheduled to

Worth airport on the way to a wedding in Rhode Island. They got me at the airport. I said yes, hung up, and got on an airplane. Then I sat on the plane for two hours waiting to take off."

Meanwhile, Rick Jaffa was sitting up all night in the Papeete airport waiting for a plane that was delayed. "We got in at 4:30 the next afternoon," Jaffa says, "having been up for 30-some hours, and there are all these messages on my machine from all my old buddies at William Morris

LAURENCE DWORET AND  
ROBERT POOL

**I**N 1980, DURING THE IRANIAN-HOSTAGE crisis, Laurence Dworet and Robert Pool wrote a film called *The Second Reckoning*. It was the story of a nuclear-blackmail threat made by Islamic fanatics against an unnamed American city and how the president of the United States and his chief adviser handle it.

For five years, almost every major studio in Hollywood turned the script down. It was too frightening, some said. It was too dark, said others. In 1985, it was optioned for \$10,000 by producer Steve Tisch, who could not persuade a studio to back it. In 1986, Marty Ransohoff expressed interest in the story, then backed off the next day. In August 1989, producer Ron Hamady optioned the script for no money, and got the pair to do a rewrite. Since Dworet and Pool told him that no Hollywood studio would touch it, he started a search for independent financing.

Then, in March 1990, *The Hunt for Red October* was released. Dworet's and Pool's agents watched for two weeks to see how well the film was doing at the box office. When they saw that it was a hit, they knew the time was right to strike. Dworet and Pool put a new cover page on the screenplay, renaming it *The Ultimatum*, and started a bidding war. Their agents told the studio chiefs that it was another *Hunt for Red October*, and that was all they needed to hear. Four days later, Dworet and Pool made a \$1-million deal with Disney for a script that had been sitting around Hollywood for ten years. "Our story is all about timing in the movie business," Dworet says. "Three weeks before, Disney could have had the film for \$10,000."

Laurence Dworet and Robert Pool met in a directing class at UCLA film school. Dworet, 40, a quick, intense man, grew up in Newton, Massachusetts. Although he always wanted to go to film school, he went to the UC San Francisco School of Medicine instead. "If you become a doctor," his father had told him, "people will

always come to you." He became an emergency-room physician and moved to Southern California to work at a hospital at night and attend film school by day. He still practices emergency medicine.

Pool, 36, a friendly, slightly disheveled man with a decidedly un-Hollywood style, was raised in McAllen, Texas, a small town near the Mexican border. "I was never very interested in the film business growing up," he says. "I just wanted to

Dworet and Pool were paid \$50,000 by Twentieth Century Fox to write *Underground*, a film about coke-dealers and narcotics cops in Chicago, but that film never got made. Producer Larry Gordon optioned a script Dworet co-wrote called *The Crossing*, a *Casablanca*-like love triangle that is set in Guatemala.

During that time, they still kept trying to sell *The Second Reckoning*. They got the \$10,000 from Steve Tisch. "Our legal fees practically ate up all that," Dworet says, "but it was great to us because it was some encouragement." Then they had their one-day deal with Ransohoff. "I hated him," Dworet says. Then, in August 1989, they made the new deal with Ron Hamady—who will share producer's credit on the Disney film—after Pool met him at a poker game.

Finally came the *Hunt for Red October* breakthrough. "Our agent literally took control of the whole thing over a weekend and hit the town with it," Dworet says. "He said, 'The timing is now.' They had three studios bidding for it. Warner Bros. came in at \$150,000. Within two hours, without any competing bids, they doubled it. But they said, 'We have to have a decision by 6:30. You can take our offer, \$300,000, or it's rescinded.' By 6:15, a number of other studios were interested.

"The next morning, at 6:20, our agent gets a call from Jeffrey Katzenberg, waking him up, saying, 'I have to have this script. What's it going to take to get this script?' Then the bidding got higher. The first offer was \$500,000. Then it became a multi-picture deal with Disney. We got

\$500,000 for the script, in cash, outright and have to do an infinite number of rewrites. And more than \$500,000 for another project. They have to pay us within nine months for that other script or one of their projects they want us to do."

Dworet and Pool celebrated by taking their wives to dinner at a jazz club to hear Stanley Turrentine. Now they are waiting to see if the film finally gets made. "They were going to go right into production," Dworet says, "then Steven Spielberg got a hold of the script. We were told he was given it by Warren Beatty, who wanted to do it, and that he said it was the best



PEN DENSHAM.

## THRILLS

"IT WAS LITERALLY  
LIKE RIDING A  
ROLLER COASTER."



get out of south Texas. I got accepted to Yale, where I majored in English lit. I took a Super 8—moviemaking class and I loved it."

At UCLA, Dworet wrote a script about emergency-room doctors that won the school's Samuel Goldwyn Award. That script got Dworet and Pool their first job, writing *The Practice*, another film about doctors, for which they were paid \$35,000. In 1980, they teamed up to write *The Second Reckoning*. In 1985, Pool was hired by Marty Ransohoff to write *Big Town*, a movie about dice players in Chicago. The film made him \$125,000.



script he's read in three years. He will decide if he wants to direct the film after he sees our rewrites."

"We feel very vindicated," Pool says, "but we'll feel a lot better if it gets made."

"The money is irrelevant," Dworet says.

"Well, it's not totally irrelevant," Pool says. "But what you want is to see a movie on the screen. I've had only one movie made, and it was a great thrill to watch an audience hear it. It was like my life was complete for a while."

## PEN DENSHAM AND JOHN WATSON



**I**T WAS LITERALLY LIKE RIDING A roller coaster," Pen Densham says about the night last February when he and his partner, John Watson, sold their screenplay, *Prince of Thieves*, in a deal that will earn their production company \$1.2 million. "It was wonderful and exhilarating."

Unlike some of the other screenwriters with \$1-million deals, Pen Densham and John Watson spent many years working up to that moment. Densham, 42, was born in London to parents who were in the British film industry. "My father was a

lighting cameraman, and I can remember playing with his cameras when I was three or four years old," he says. "He didn't want me to go into the business; he wanted me to be an electrician, learn radio repair. But I never wanted to do anything else. When I was nineteen, I went to Canada and went to work for companies that were making short films."

Watson, 43, was born in Somerset to parents who ran a dairy farm. "I graduated from Cambridge with a Greek-classics major, and I didn't know what I wanted to be, except I didn't want to be a farmer," he says. "I went to work in London for the *London Weekly Advertiser*, going from store to store making sure they were stocking the newspaper. I ran into some American film editors. I got into a cutting room with them, and I was instantly fascinated. I just loved it. In 1969, I talked my way into a job in Chicago as the assistant to an editor and worked with him on short films. But after six months, I would have had to enroll with the draft board to renew my visa, so I went to Toronto."

By then, Densham was running a big house for young filmmakers in Toronto. A friend told Watson that he could probably rent a room there. The two met when they were both 22 and have been friends and partners ever since. Over the next ten years, their short films won more than 80 awards. One short film, *Life Times Nine*,

was nominated for an Oscar in 1973. Another, *Don't Mess With Bill*, was nominated in 1980.

"Finally, we reached a point where I realized we had to bridge into the dramatic side," Densham says. "So I wrote a script for a 25-minute film about a horse that was foaling, and the crucible was that it was a breech birth and the guy had fifteen minutes to decide whether to save the mare or the foal. It is called *If Wishes Were Horses*. A Canadian reviewer called it the best movie of any length ever shown on Canadian television."

"Norman Jewison saw it and brought me to be his guest producer-director on the making of *F.I.S.T.* He had gone to the Canadian government and said, 'I want to do something for Canadian filmmakers.' He interviewed me and a couple of others, and he chose me. John came with me. After that, we ended up coming to Los Angeles with our wives to take the plunge—starting at the bottom. We were adopted by Stallone and worked on several of his films as consultants. So the studios became interested in us. We hired people to develop scripts for us, and the scripts were terrible. We were watching people who were supposedly professional screenwriters fritter away our opportunities. So we started writing our own scripts."

"About a year and a half ago, I was coming up to a space of time when I

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didn't have something specific to work on, so I started to go through my files. Out of all the ideas, the Robin Hood one seemed to be the strongest. What I had written in my files was 'Robin Hood meets Raiders.'

"I talked to John and he got excited about it, and we started working on it. The first thing I wanted to do was a story about saving England, and the second thing I wanted to do was a story about an Arab and a Christian taking on black magic. The movie starts with this dazzling escape. Robin is in a Saracen prison, and he saves the life of this Saracen prisoner and they escape together. The Saracen prisoner says, 'I'm coming back to England with you.' It starts with a classic buddy relationship. I decided to make the Sheriff of Nottingham almost a Charlie Manson-ish character, who's into the Druid religion and black magic and is using that religion to corrupt and co-opt the nobility and take over England from the Norman king. So Robin collects the band, and they team up to take on the sheriff and save England."

It took about six months to finish the screenplay. Densham and Watson showed it to their William Morris agent, Mike Simpson (who also put together the Jaffa-Richardson deal), the first weekend in February. "We had to offer it first to Paramount," Densham says, "because we have a deal there. It was a near-miss there. Some people were excited; others didn't want it. So we put it out over town over the weekend of February 10. There were people in all the studios reading it and phoning our agent every five minutes. We were getting reports like 'He's on page 63 right now, and he really likes it.'

"There was one studio that was offering a very low amount of money for it, and we were close to saying yes, because we weren't sure what else was coming in. But Mike pulled off a coup. He got some information that one studio was very excited about it, and then the movie took off in terms of the bidding. Finally, on Wednesday, February 14, Valentine's Day, about nine o'clock at night, the deal was made. And all over town, agents and lawyers and executives at three quarters of the studios were earning the wrath of their spouses."

They each celebrated with a quiet dinner with their wives. Then, about a month later, Pen Densham celebrated with a trip to Hawaii. "I very rarely take any holiday, so I essentially forced myself out of the door because I couldn't think of a better excuse to do it. I waited until a month after the deal was made, though, 'cause for that month, until everything is signed, it was sort of like being in escrow. This industry tends to work in what we call feeding frenzies. And you try and keep a cool head amid it. I like to use the analogy that you've got to harpoon the whale as it's coming at you, 'cause otherwise it's going to run right past you."

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