

Paul Thomas Anderson

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Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 5, #1 (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1998)
& VOLUME 7, #1 (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2000)

On the eve of *Magnolia's* release, Paul Thomas Anderson is clearly a happy man. Then again, it's not every twenty-nine-year-old filmmaker who gets compared to Martin Scorsese and Robert Altman on his second film, gets final cut on his third, and is able to get Tom Cruise to work for peanuts. Yet Paul's journey to where he is now wasn't always so smooth.

Paul Thomas Anderson was born in 1970 and grew up in the San Fernando Valley where *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* take place. Paul's father was Ernie Anderson, a comic who played a wild horror-show host in the '60s named Ghoulardi. Ernie would later gain fame in the '70s as a famous voice-over announcer for ABC. His voice was instantly recognizable when introducing spots for *America's Funniest Home Videos*, *The Winds of War*, *Roots*, and of course, *The Love Boat*. Ernie instilled a unique sense of humor, as well as a strong independent streak, which Paul carried with him into his filmmaking career. And as you'll read here, Ernie's antics would later inspire one of the most celebrated scenes in *Boogie Nights*.

In 1992, Anderson wrote and directed a short subject, *Cigarettes and Coffee*. After it played the Sundance Festival in 1993, he secured a deal with Ryscher to make his first feature. He expanded *Cigarettes and Coffee* into a full-length film, which was then titled *Sydney*.

Anderson's dream come true of making his first feature turned into a nightmare when Ryscher took the film away from him and retitled it *Hard Eight*, a title he still hates. In order to try to save his version of the film, he sent a work print to Cannes; after it was accepted into their competition, Ryscher relented and allowed Anderson's cut to be released. With the help of the film's stars Gwyneth Paltrow and John C. Reilly, Paul raised \$250,000 to finish *Hard Eight*, but Ryscher dumped the film into theaters with little support and it quickly disappeared.

Boogie Nights also had its origins in a short subject, namely *The Dirk Diggler Story*, which Anderson shot on video at age seventeen. During his perpetual frustration with *Hard Eight*, he threw himself into writing an epic 300-page screenplay. The film would pay homage to the golden age of pornography, with its centerpiece being the rise and fall of a young porno star loosely based on John Holmes.

Shortly after shooting wrapped, word got around that *Boogie Nights* was really the film to watch that fall. *Variety* wrote that Anderson's "striking command of technique, bravura filmmaking, and passionate exploration of the possibilities of a new kind of storytelling recall the young Scorsese of *Mean Streets*." Anderson was also drawing comparisons to Robert Altman during his *Nashville* period, and Steven Spielberg as he was coming into his own with *Sugarland Express*.

Boogie Nights not only showcased Anderson's assured directing, but his strength in writing strong, three-dimensional characters. The film featured breakthrough roles for Mark Wahlberg, Heather Graham, and Don Cheadle, and not since John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* had anyone made as fine a comeback as Burt Reynolds (many felt it was his best performance since *Deliverance*).

The expectations were high for *Boogie Nights* to be the next *Pulp Fiction*, and while it didn't get medieval at the box-office, the film's popularity and its influence on a number of films that followed can't be denied. Anderson also earned an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay.

Already everyone was wondering how Anderson would top *Boogie Nights*, but he kept his plans for the future vague, telling the *LA Times*, "I'm mostly thinking in terms of writing great roles for actors I love." He also promised *Details*, with tongue firmly in cheek, "I'm gonna reinvent drama. *Rashomon* will look timid compared to what I'll do next. I don't know what it's going to be about, but from the beginning of the movie to the end, nothing bad is going to happen."

By late 1998, Anderson had finished his next screenplay, *Magnolia*. Throughout the making of the film, *Magnolia's* plot and characters have been kept a closely guarded secret. Anderson was granted final cut of *Magnolia*, which guaranteed his innovative screenplay would make a smooth transition to the screen.

Like *Hard Eight* and *Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia* follows a group of haunted lives intersecting with one another, this time during a twenty-four-hour period in the Valley. Again Anderson has written strong and unique characters that fuel great performances, the character Frank T.J. Mackey already generating much advance buzz and talk of an Oscar nod for Tom Cruise.

Anderson hasn't lost his appetite for risks: *Magnolia* takes plenty, including a spectacular freak-of-nature climax that proves once and for all, it's not easy being green. *Magnolia* is a complicated, unique, and often painful movie that's both uplifting and haunting. He subsequently wrote and directed *Punch-Drunk Love* (starring Adam Sandler). *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Paul Thomas Anderson in 1998 and 2000 and found him as unique and thoughtful as his films.

What's the most common mistake in written dialogue?

Complete sentences. Bad movie dialogue speaks in complete sentences without any overlapping or interruption, and avoids elliptical speech, which is truer to how people actually talk.

Did you consciously train your ear to be sensitive to how people talk?

I probably did when I was eighteen and was just starting as a writer. Actually my mission then was to rip off David Mamet, because I foolishly believed Mamet's dialogue was how people really talked. It took me a while to realize that Mamet had developed a wonderfully stylized way of highlighting the way humans speak. People immediately think of dialogue when they hear Mamet's name, but I think the strength of his writing is his storytelling—he uses very solid, old fashioned techniques in setting up his stories. *House of Games*, for instance, is one of the best scripts ever written, and it's the story structure that makes it so brilliant.

When you're writing dialogue, does it take on a life of its own and move in directions that surprise you?

Absolutely. I'm showing some of my cards here, but I often write scenes without knowing where they're gonna go, and as I write I start acting and sort of improvising. It's great when the scene takes on a life of its own and frustrating when it doesn't, because the passages you have to labor over are invariably worse than the ones that seem to write themselves. This notion that writing happens in the rewriting is something I've never agreed with. I've always hated rewriting. Rewriting is for pussies! Send it out, zits and all, is my feeling.

What passage of dialogue in Boogie Nights are you most proud of?

The three scenes where Amber and Rollergirl are on a coke binge. This movie has many Achilles heels, but when I watch those scenes I put my ego hat on and say, "Okay, we nailed those scenes."

How do you know how people on a coke binge talk?

I've done a lot of coke and had those insane conversations.

I was struck by the dialogue in the scene where Mark Wahlberg's character, Dirk, meets his sidekick, Reed Rothchild, played by John C. Reilly. I get the impression you're not a guy who hangs out at gyms, yet you had those ridiculous, "how much can you bench press?" gym conversations down pat; how did you learn gym dialect? Just by knowing those kinds of guys when I was growing up, and loving the absurdity of those conversations. John [Reilly] and I have a similar sense of humor and we've spent hours riffing with dialogue and laughing. I wrote that scene to give John something he could have fun with.

How quickly does slang evolve? Was there language commonly used in the Boogie Nights era that would sound completely foreign to people now?

Probably not because pop culture is currently obsessed with the '70s. So, although a word like “foxy” may be given an ironic spin now, it certainly isn't foreign to us.

Is it always a failure when dialogue is used to explain the plot, or can that be a stylistic device?

In theory it's a failure, however, there are actors—such as Philip Baker Hall—who are so good at helping the story along that you can get away with it. Perhaps it's because he's the antithesis of a classical Shakespearean actor, but Philip can deliver massive amounts of exposition without diminishing the character he's playing.

What elements must a story have in order to interest you?

I like stories with good old-fashioned roots that obey the rules—you know, “the gun on the wall in the first act goes off in the third,” and so forth. My favorite directors are the ones who know and embrace those rules, then pile something completely punk rock on top of them—François Truffaut, for instance.

Do you have any interest in adapting material, or do you intend to be the sole author of all your scripts?

I'm open to adapting material, although the one time I tried it I wasn't too successful—I adapted the Russell Banks novel *Rule of the Bone* for Carl Franklin. Having been through an experience with *Hard Eight* where I felt my work had been violated, I sort of became this master protector of other peoples' work, and I couldn't make myself tread on the bible, which was Banks's book. I couldn't get a grip on the fact that I was writing a movie, not a love letter to the book.

Do you have structured writing habits?

Absolutely, and they revolve around finding a pattern of behavior I can depend on. Waking up at the same time every day, having certain rituals to go through that free me up so I don't even have to worry about putting my pants on—it's all about routine. I write in the morning and can put in three or four focused hours a day. It's limited to that because I smoke myself to death when I write, and smoking makes me tired. At the same time, there's almost something superstitious about smoking, as if the cigarettes are a good luck charm. It's probably very silly.

In the firecracker scene in Boogie Nights, I noticed some of the lyrics of “Jessie's Girl” seemed to show how afraid Mark Wahlberg was, like “I play along with the charade” and “He's watching them with those eyes....” Was that intentional?

It was but actually not exactly in that way. What I liked about “Jessie's Girl” playing there was just a weird sense of romantic melancholy that the song gives me. It reminded me personally of a far more innocent and goofy time

in my life. I liked hearing this goofy love song over watching Mark Wahlberg just squirm. The relation I have to that song is being fourteen and having a crush on a girl at the mall. It was wonderful to plug it in there because that's where that character should be at that time in his life. Instead, he's stuck in a house with firecrackers going off in some stupid, pseudo drug deal. That song should mean something else to that character. Instead, he's suffering through that song.

Your father, Ernie Anderson, was a horror-movie host in the '60s named Ghoulardi, and I read that on his show he used to perform skits with firecrackers. Is that where the idea for the firecracker scene in Boogie Nights came from?

Yeah, absolutely. It comes from two places. It comes from the inspiration from my dad lighting off a bunch of firecrackers on his show as well as... if you watch *Putney Swope*, which is a movie Robert Downey Sr. made, there's a wonderful piece of background action where a character throws a firecracker off in a scene and everyone turns around and looks. Now that's practically the end of it. I called up Robert Downey Sr. and I said, "You have a great piece of background action that I want to take and make a piece of foreground action." He said, "Great, be my guest."

So did that scene in Putney Swope give you ideas about how to build tension in your own scene?

No, I just thought it was wonderfully goofy and thought that would be enough. I remember rehearsing that whole Rahad Jackson sequence in *Boogie Nights*, and it was very nerveracking. We did the full rehearsal, my friend Joe Chan played the kid with the firecrackers, and I told him, "Just for the rehearsals, we'll mime that you're throwing the firecrackers. You'll throw one here, throw one here..." We would do these full rehearsals and here we were for the final set-piece of the movie and I was not exactly happy. I was wondering what was wrong with this scene and really nervous. This two and a half hour movie was coming to an end and my punchline isn't working. So I said, you know what? I guess the only thing to do here is start shooting it. Well the second one of those firecrackers went off for real, I knew I was okay! Everybody jumped! Everybody jumped except Alfred Molina, and he didn't jump because he had an ear-wig playing the Night Ranger song in his ear, so he couldn't hear the firecrackers going off. His character is completely unresponsive to it, but everybody else on the set and in the room is jumping out of their seats because these firecrackers were so fucking loud!

What a lot of people liked about Boogie Nights was the film told a story in a non-judgmental way. It didn't paint the world of porno as an evil empire, but it didn't exactly say it was the greatest thing in the world. It just said, "Here's the story, draw your own conclusions." How were you able to do that?

Well ultimately I think the funniest thing is, and I think this might attribute to the lack of box-office success for *Boogie Nights*, is that it is, to a certain

extent, judgmental. I love those characters. And I love pornography just as much as it completely disgusts me and completely depresses me. So the first half of the movie is all fun and games, but the back-half of the movie is a sort of punishment for those fun and games. It's my own guilty feelings about pornography. So to a certain extent, the characters and pornography are judged. It's just done in such a gentle and honest way because I didn't know I was doing it. I also write for my friends that are actors. And no matter what I do, I'm never fully writing the character. I'm writing eighty percent that character and twenty percent that person I know will be playing that part. And I'll never truly never let them get hurt.

I actually tried with *Magnolia* to make one judgment that was important to me, and I hope this is very clear. I wanted to judge Jimmy Gator. I wanted to make it very clear that I wouldn't let him kill himself. I would let a frog fall from the sky, land on a gun, make that gun blow up a television, cause a fire, and make him burn. Because it was my judgment that what he did was so wrong and so unforgivable that it would not be good enough for the writer to allow him to kill himself. I wanted to put a writerly judgment on that character and relate to an audience what my moral standards are. Frank T.J. Mackey is on that line where you've made enough mistakes in your life and you better start making up for them. Because if you don't really, really soon, you're pushing to that place of unforgivable. But I can still forgive Frank. If he smartens up by the end of this movie, I'll be happy. If he doesn't, fuck him, [laughs] because he's hurting too many people.

The transformation that Mark Wahlberg made in Boogie Nights was really well done. It's hard to pinpoint an exact moment when he starts to change and it's so gradual, it's totally believable.

I just like movies, and I guess what I like in my movies is where you see a character change by maybe two degrees as opposed to the traditional movie change of maybe ninety degrees. I guess that always feels false to me in movies because that doesn't truly happen. Around me, at least in the life I live, I guess I don't see people change ninety or a hundred degrees. I see them change in very small increments. I think it's just a monitor I might have on myself as a writer not to make any false scenes. I would have had to sit down as a writer and think, "I'm gonna write the scene where Dirk changes." But instead I'm keeping a tab on the reality factor while hopefully making it entertaining. Therefore it's going to creep up on me, just as it maybe crept up on you. I'm just going along, and as I'm hitting a certain point in the movie, Dirk's just kind of changing. It's a hard thing to describe but I can probably only successfully pull that off if I'm not being self-conscious.

One scene in Boogie Nights that was very effective was when Dirk's mother screams at him and kicks him out of the house. A lot of people who come from dysfunctional families told me that scene was like something out of their lives. Were you surprised a lot of people could not only relate to the scene but also thought it was one

of the strongest in the film?

Yeah, but I was also surprised by how many people thought it was one of the weakest scenes in the movie. When his mother comes at him like that, she's really crazy and out of control. She's kind of without motivation to a certain extent. I think one of the greatest mistakes that I've made in the past and that a writer can make is, "What's the character's motivation?" Well, a lot of times it's so fucking confused and so polluted that you really have no idea. That woman is pretty nuts, and I think it's sometimes hard for an audience to grab a hold of a character whose intentions aren't clear. You don't really know what the fuck she's yelling about. You know she has an odd jealousy towards him or towards the neighborhood girl that he's banging, so she's upset about that, but her actions are so manic, you can't get a hold of them. I was just really glad that the actress in the scene didn't require a lot of clarity on her behavior, because I couldn't have given it. I really wrote what made sense, and what made sense was sometimes so illogical. There are some people that saw it and said, "That scene doesn't make sense! Why is she going crazy?" And I would just say, "You know what? I've never been able to figure it out." But it sure makes sense, and I've sure been there.

One of my favorite lines in Boogie Nights was during the documentary that Amber Waves made. Reed Rothchild says, "If movies caused violence, we'd be able to wipe out violence tomorrow. Boom! No more films!" Of course there's a lot of debate about how movies supposedly cause violence and the way I interpreted that line, it almost showed how silly that argument was. Was that your intention?

I think John [Reilly] and I have both had a good laugh many times about this argument that movies don't cause violence. But movies do cause violence. Movies absolutely promote violence. I know that as a kid when I saw movies, I would want to be like the characters in the movies. I would want to dress like them, and I would want to talk like them. Now luckily I've channeled that into a pretty good job making movies. However, if I'd maybe gone a slightly different course, I could see how wanting to kill my classmates might have been appealing to me. It might have been promoted by what I saw in movies. Listen, I think [the scene] is a very sarcastic approach to that argument, because I just don't buy that filmmakers don't have a responsibility. They absolutely do. I feel like I have a responsibility. I don't particularly want to see a whole lot of guns in the rest of my movies. I'm not really interested in it anymore. I'm sick of it. I think a movie like *Fight Club* is an incredibly irresponsible film.

I wasn't expecting you to say that. Most of the time when a filmmaker is asked what their responsibility is towards an audience, they'll say something like, "If someone blows up a building, that's not my fault."

Bullshit. I think that's a bunch of bullshit. Listen, I don't want to make beautiful, candy-coated movies, but there's a lot more dramatic things and more tension-filled moments in my life than guns coming out, you know what I

mean? I'm sick of it. I'm sick of the violence, I'm sick of the easy way out which is, "Well I'm just showing how it is." It's time to do better than that. We have an obligation.

Were you ever afraid that anything in your movies might have been interpreted the wrong way?

Absolutely. I think I came to this kind of theory and fervor because the very first time we screened *Boogie Nights* for a test audience, when Little Bill discovers his wife on New Years Eve and goes to get his gun, the audience cheered. And when he shot her, the audience cheered. Now I sank in my seat, and I have never felt worse in my life. I thought that I'd really done wrong in terms of those characters, and in the movie and everything else. But I felt a little bit better when he shot himself because they weren't laughing and applauding anymore. There was dead silence and they really felt it. So when I saw that and I felt that, I really kind of changed my tune and felt a real responsibility to not want an audience to cheer, laugh or have a good time when violence happens. I'm all for having fun, but gunshots hurt. You know, I always thought the subtitle for *Boogie Nights* should be, "It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt."

If you make a film that's really outstanding, will the studio trust you? The word of mouth on Boogie Nights was strong before it came out, and it seemed like the studio was happy with it. If you make a movie like a Boogie Nights or a Pulp Fiction, does that put you in a position to call the shots?

Not during that movie, but after that movie, yes. The truth of the matter is, I thought *Boogie Nights* was a great movie, but there were a few people within New Line who didn't think *Boogie Nights* was a great movie. I still had to fight for my cut of that movie. Eventually I got it, but there were a lot of people within New Line who thought it should be shorter, who ultimately don't even like it that much now. The truth of the matter is, it's only now since the success of *Boogie Nights* that I haven't had to do a true song and dance to defend my vision of the movie. When I showed *Boogie Nights* to the studio the very first time, they came out and hugged me and shook my hand and said, "This is the greatest movie we've ever made at New Line. We're so thrilled, it's wonderful." Then we went and tested the movie, and when the movie did not test well (because there's no way in hell a movie like that is going to test well), they got cold feet and were real confused about their own opinions. I have to thank Lynn Hirschberg, who's a wonderful writer and a journalist. When she saw the movie, she wrote something about it to send to the heads of New Line, basically saying this movie's one of a kind, it's fantastic, etc. That helped them get their confidence back that was lost from the test screenings. So then all the early press reactions started to happen and the truth of the matter is, I don't think a few of the New Line executives got their full confidence back because it resulted in a very weak release strategy.

The bottom line is, I started to realize why movies cost so much money. And

sometimes it's quite a good thing if they cost a lot of money because it means the studio is then shackled with that cost, which means they've got to pour even more money into marketing it. If a movie is as cheap as *Boogie Nights* was, they essentially knew that with the reviews that they had they could under-advertise it and walk away with a break-even. It's a very scary notion, but there are actually computers that run studios where they plug in how much the movie costs, they plug in how many theaters are going to get it, they plug in the reviews, they plug in the subject matter, and they can know exactly how much it's going to make. And they will get it to that number so they can walk away without having risked anything. I knew exactly how much money *Boogie Nights* was going to make before it came out because a marketing executive at another studio told me so. He said "\$29 million and da-da-da-duh cents." And if you look it up, that's exactly what the movie made.

Leonard Cohen once commented, "every artist—be it a painter, composer, or filmmaker—has one song he writes over and over again. And the beautiful thing about this endeavor is that you don't realize you're writing the same song repeatedly, but in fact, it keeps returning to you wearing the original blue gown." Do you agree?

Probably, although it's too early for me to tell what mine is. I think there are similar themes and motifs in the two movies I've made, but I didn't see that until after the fact. Both stories have father figures, a young protégé, a makeshift family, and the paying of some kind of karmic debt. With *Hard Eight*, the lead character, Sidney, is dealing with guilt he feels over something he did before the story in the film begins. *Boogie Nights* could almost be seen as a prequel to *Hard Eight* in that it follows this kid as he does things that leave him with a huge karmic debt. When the story ends, you sense that Dirk will now attempt to atone for the things he's done; in other words, Dirk becomes Sidney.

Do you feel it's important that your next film be markedly different from Boogie Nights?

No. I think it's important that I resist being influenced by people who encourage me to make another *Boogie Nights* type of movie though, and I want to put the proper pair of horse blinders on. I try not to second guess my instincts, and at the moment I'm writing a part for Luis Guzman. As the character has developed, I've realized I'm basically writing Maurice [Guzman's character in *Boogie Nights*] again. Part of me says, "wait a minute—you're writing Maurice again," but another part of me wants to explore this character more—maybe because Maurice got shortchanged in *Boogie Nights*. The new script is set in 1997, so maybe this is Maurice twenty years later.

You're presently in a precarious place as a artist. You've been able to privately develop your first two films, but the success of Boogie Nights has brought many conflicting forces to bear on you and your work—the pressures of the marketplace, the distraction of flattery, the demands being made on your time. Are there steps you

can take to protect your sanity and your future as a filmmaker?

That's a good question and all I can say is I'm learning as I go. I wrote my first two movies fueled by a desire for revenge on all the people who told me I'd never amount to anything, and those movies came from a place of "I'll show you." Now I hear people say *Boogie Nights* is great, but what are you gonna do next, and that's a challenge too. Ultimately I'm not worried because once you start writing and you're alone in a room and you get in a groove, there's nothing else going on in the world. I've been to the Hollywood parties and the lunches with so and so, and without sounding arrogant or ungrateful, I can tell you that none of it is as fun as making a movie.

How were you able to avoid the hoopla of Boogie Nights and concentrate on writing another movie?

You know, it's actually pretty easy for about three hours of the day and those are the three hours of the day that I'm writing. You're really only self-conscious or thinking about it when you're not writing. My general work pattern is that I wake up very early in the morning and I write. I can really only write for three or four hours before I'm either tired or I've smoked too much. And that's when you start getting self-conscious and you start thinking, "Jeez, there's all these people paying attention to me and what I'm going to do next." I'm just thankful that it's not when I'm writing, because it's not affecting it. You know how it is: when you're alone in your room and it's you and your computer, you're truly not thinking of anything else. In the off-hours, I was probably self-conscious, but in the on-hours I wasn't.

Did you ever feel any pressure to follow up Boogie Nights?

Well, I might have. The truth of the matter is when I sat down to write *Magnolia*, I truly sat down to write something very small, very quick, very intimate, and something I could make very cheaply. *Boogie Nights* was this massive, two-and-a-half-hour epic. And I thought, "You know what? I wanna bury my head in the sand and just make a little small movie." So, in other words, I might have been reacting to the size of *Boogie Nights*. But obviously, no hoopla informed it, otherwise I wouldn't have made a three-hour movie that's as big and long as it is. I truly just ended up writing from my gut and my gut took me to writing *Magnolia* as it is, as opposed to a smaller version of it.

How long did it take to put Magnolia together? When did you first start writing?

I was kind of where I am right now, as I'm mixing *Magnolia*. You start thinking about, "Well, gee... what am I going to do next?" It was the same sort of thing on *Boogie Nights*. On *Boogie Nights* we had an incredibly long editing period because I was going through a lot of MPAA negotiations regarding the rating, trying to get an R rating. I had a lot of free time to think and tinker with the editing on *Boogie Nights*, and I started formulating some of the thoughts that were *Magnolia*. Now what happened was, as I came closer to the finishing of *Boogie Nights*, that's when I started to write stuff down. While

I was mixing *Boogie Nights*, I started jotting ideas down. Once the movie was off and out into the theaters, I was able to jump right into writing. That was November 1997.

Why do you feel you write with such a big scope?

I think if I have a problem as a writer it's writer's block in reverse, which can be just as detrimental as not knowing what to write. I think I have so much shit in my brain that sometimes I just kind of vomit a lot of it out. *Boogie Nights* is a three-hour movie, but believe me, I had enough pages to make an eight-hour movie. It's just about pairing it down to where I think it's right. It's funny because the movie that helped me make a mark, *Boogie Nights*, was long, and then this movie's long. But my first movie was an hour and forty minutes, a regular movie length. So it's not as if I'm completely interested in being the "epic guy" each time. I might sit down with a master plan and want to write a ninety-minute movie. But if it ends up being 200 pages, at a certain point, I've just got to decipher whether I'm being lazy or whether my gut's truly taking me to a proper place.

How did you avoid repeating yourself?

I'm not exactly sure that I haven't. Maybe I've just dressed the same thing up in different clothes, you know what I mean? I was not really able to notice a pattern in my work until I made three movies. Now I'm starting to decipher that they all have something to do with surrogate families and family connections. I'm only noticing this probably because people say it about my stuff. I think a lot of things interest me, so I'm prone to repeat myself because there's a million different styles of clothes that I like.

In Magnolia you did a really good job of going back and forth between stories without confusing the viewer or losing momentum. Are you able to write a story all the way through like that?

What I did on this was, at certain points, if I felt lost or confused with any of these characters' stories, I would break it out and string it end to end chronologically instead of its being interrupted by another person's story, just to see how that was working as a movie of its own. Like the Jason Robards/Phil Hoffman story, I plucked that out on its own just to make sure that it was going well. I think the writer in me loves to branch off to other characters, but it's the director in me that gets excited in terms of working on transitions and how to successfully pull it off. So I think I end up writing for myself as a director when I go to places like that.

How did you come up with Tom Cruise's character Frank T.J. Mackey?

About three years ago, a friend of mine was teaching a class on audio-recording engineering. He had two students in the class that he thought were particularly interesting. One afternoon he was going to lunch and he noticed these two guys talking in the recording studio. There was an open mike out

there, and he recorded a DAT of these two guys talking. So a couple of years after that, he found this unlabeled DAT and what he heard blew his mind. He played it for me and essentially what happened was you heard these two guys talking about women and about how you've got to "respect the cock and tame the cunt." They started talking all this trash and ultimately what we decided was they were quoting this guy named Ross. Well if these guys were talking this ridiculously, who was Ross? What we deciphered was, there's this guy Ross Jeffries who was teaching this new version of the Eric Weber course, "How to Pick Up Women," but this guy had a whole new slant on it which had to do with hypnotism and all these subliminal language techniques. Then after researching him, it led me to four or five other guys like him, and so I just went hogwild in the arena of this guy, trying to decipher, "Why is anyone like this?"

How did Tom Cruise become aware of the role and did you write it for any actor in particular?

I wrote it for him. He had called me up when *Boogie Nights* came up. He was making *Eyes Wide Shut*, and his agents called me to ask if I was interested in meeting him. He was a big fan of *Boogie Nights*, and I said absolutely. Coincidentally, I happened to be going to London to promote *Boogie Nights*. So I went and met Tom and told him I was about to sit down and write my next movie. I was just sort of formulating the character and Tom said, "Listen, anything you do I would love to take a look and be involved." I said, "Okay, let me call you in about eight months when I'm done writing." I talked to him once or twice over the course of eight months and I said, "When you're done shooting that movie, I'm going to be done. I'm going to give this to you and I think you're gonna have a lot of fun." So I finished writing it, handed it to him, and it was literally like one of those Hollywood stories. We got together the next day, talked about it, and we were off.

How happy were you with his performance?

I am completely enamored with his performance. I must admit to writing a very show-offy role, and Tom kinda knew that. I told him, "You get to do everything in this. You do the banquet hall seminar where you get to be on-stage and you get to do the 'going to see Dad' bedside scene. You really get to run the gamut here." I think he was really excited by that, and I think he just went with it. There was not a moment where he was scared, there wasn't a moment where he questioned what I asked of him. If anything, he brought too much to the table and I would say, "No, you can't use a whip in this scene!" I would just have to calm him down and remind him to keep it simple sometimes. That was really the only direction I gave him. He really was spot-on with how to do it.

In the scene where Mackey sees his father before he passes away, in the screenplay it seems like they came to some sort of reconciliation. But in the film, we don't

know if they reconciled or not.

There are very, very, very few times as a writer where I will write a scene and leave it to what happens. That was one scene where I just kind of underwrote it intentionally. I just said, "Listen. The most important thing is that this character goes to see his father." I felt when he decided to see his father, he should walk in very quickly, very aggressively, with a real hard on to get back at his dad. And whatever happened after that was really, truly up to Tom. It's one of those moments that you do leave for an actor. It's a very scary, dangerous thing to do, and generally I don't do it because you should have a plan. But it was one of those things where I decided the best way to do this is probably leave room for whatever happens and whatever Tom can emotionally bring to the table. I said, "Listen, you can be as angry as you wanna be, you can be as sad as you can get. Let's start doing it and let's see what happens."

The rain of frogs at the end of the film was great. Several scenes in Magnolia refer to the book of Exodus in which there was a plague of frogs after Moses's people weren't allowed into the promised land. Was the rain of frogs a natural reaction to the turmoil that built up in the film?

Well, that's certainly an element. There's certainly a Biblical reference there, but I'd be a liar if I said to you it was written initially as a Biblical reference. I truthfully didn't even know it was in the Bible when I first wrote the sequence. I had read about a rain of frogs through the works of Charles Fort, who's a wonderful writer. He was the person who coined the term UFO, who wrote about odd phenomena. So when I read about the rain of frogs, I was going through a weird, personal time. I don't want to get too personal, but maybe there are certain moments in your life when things are so fucked up and so confused that someone can say to you, "It's raining frogs," and that makes sense. That somehow makes sense as a warning; that somehow makes sense as a sign. I started to understand why people turn to religion in times of trouble, and maybe my form of finding religion was reading about rains of frogs and realizing that makes sense to me somehow. And then of course to discover it in the Bible and the reference that it makes there just sort of verifies it, like, "Hey, I guess I'm on the right track."

Do you want everyone who sees Magnolia to have to interpret the scene in their own way and think what it could mean to them?

Absolutely. I'm normally not a big fan of that; I generally like to make my points. But there are some times where if you pull it off properly, you can put something on the plate of the viewer and go, "You know what? However you want to decipher this, you can." And there absolutely is no wrong way. If you want to reference the Bible, that's good; if you want to link it to something else you can. There's a notion that you can judge a society's existence by the health of its frogs. There's something about a frog's health; the color of its skin, the texture, the wetness on its back, that's an indication of how we're treating ourselves as a society. So when you look around and see

that all the frogs are dying or deformed, it's sort of a warning sign about how we're treating ourselves.

The ironic thing is as I was thinking this up, I met with Phillip Baker Hall, who's an actor I work with over and over again, and he asked, "What's the next one about?" And I said, "Well, I can't really describe much to you Phillip, but there's this one sequence in the film where it starts to rain frogs." He was looking at me and just nodding his head. Then I explained the history of frog rain, because it really does happen, it's something that has happened many times. Then he said, "I have an interesting story. Just after the war, I was in Switzerland and I was in a rain of frogs." I said, "What?" Phillip had been driving on a mountain pass in Switzerland and he said for about fifteen minutes it rained frogs. It was really foggy and the mountain road was covered in ice. The frogs falling was not the thing that freaked him out. What freaked him out was that his car could not get any traction and he was afraid he was gonna fall off the mountain! I just thought right then and there I gotta go through with this sequence.

Magnolia and Boogie Nights have a lot of great songs in their soundtracks. Do you write to music?

Absolutely. Even more with this one than ever before. This one was very specifically written to Aimee Mann's songs. She's a good friend of mine, she's a wonderful singer and songwriter. In addition to a lot of great songs that have been released, I was privy to a lot of demo stuff she was working on at the time. So I had those to work off of. In a way, I sat down to adapt one of her songs. There's a song called "Deathly" that she [wrote] and the very first line of the song is "Now that I've met you, would you object to never seeing me again?" Melora Walters says that in the movie. That sort of notion of being unlovable or being so fucked up you can't understand how anyone could love you back was really important and really beautiful to me. It kind of made sense to me at that time in my life. I probably owe Aimee a ton of money for the inspiration she was to this movie.

You have final cut on Magnolia, and you're certainly in an enviable position as a writer and director. A lot of people reading this could be on the verge of a break as a writer and are about to face the den of wolves that's known as development hell. Do you have any suggestions or advice on how writers can empower themselves more?

Right off the bat, I want to say that my motto is: remember the power is yours. The power is in the writer. It seems that the writer has been so neutered lately that he's forgotten that the buck starts and stops with him. I think that's how I got to direct my first movie. Basically it was a bribery situation; it was, "I know that you like this script, but there's no one else who's going to direct it, and I own it." I think to get paid for a script before you write it is just certain death, because you're basically giving ownership to someone else. I think what most writers have to remember is they can not only have power of authorship, but if they really want to, they can have power of own-

ership. There's a very big difference. Ultimately, it is my choice about who I give my script to. Anyone who is writing alone in their room, that is their material, that is their product, their copyright; they own that. Don't give up easy: never fuck on the first date. However, I think I've only come to learn a lot of lessons because I got incredibly fucked. I'd made my first movie with a company I'd never met. I never shook hands with anyone at Rysler Entertainment, and it was the biggest regret of my life, because there was that small period of time where I had my first movie taken away from me. Ultimately I got it back, and what's out in the world is my version, but I went through a movie being taken away from me, a movie being recut behind my back. I went through all of that, and it created a sort of paranoia and guardedness in me that I'm glad I have, because that will never, ever happen to me again. But I was so fuckin' anxious to get my movie made, I would have gone anywhere. So it's hard to say. Is it good advice to tell someone to hold out? Well, I sure wouldn't have taken that advice when I was twenty-three years old and I could get my movie made. You're gonna go where you can go, but if you can just remember that your brain is yours and they can't own it, then it's a really healthy thing.

What's the most valuable thing you've learned about this movie business in the last two years?

I unfortunately learned that writing and directing a good movie is only fifty percent of my job, and that the other fifty percent is dealing with the people who finance it and get the movie seen. Because however good your movie is, it doesn't mean shit if nobody sees it. It's very odd, but the movie business is full of people who don't love movies, and the more people I meet in this industry the more I want to run away.

How is having a hit movie different than you'd anticipated it would be?

I still feel like I don't know the secret frat boy handshake. I was recently at Carrie Fisher's birthday party, and they were all there—Jack Nicholson, Madonna, Warren Beatty, you name it. And sure, some people knew who I was and complimented me on the film, but I still felt like I wasn't a member of the club.

Do movies shape the culture or merely reflect it as it already exists?

I think they shape the culture—and that, of course, means they have a responsibility to the culture. As a filmmaker, how much I feel the weight of that responsibility changes from one day to the next. If you feel it too heavily you're probably becoming pretentious; if you don't feel it at all you're probably a jerk.