

# The Buffalo Film Seminars



**Directed by** Hal Ashby  
**Screenplay by** Jerzy Kosinski, based on his novel  
**Produced by** Andrew Braunsberg...producer  
**Original Music by** Johnny Mandel  
**Cinematography by** Caleb Deschanel

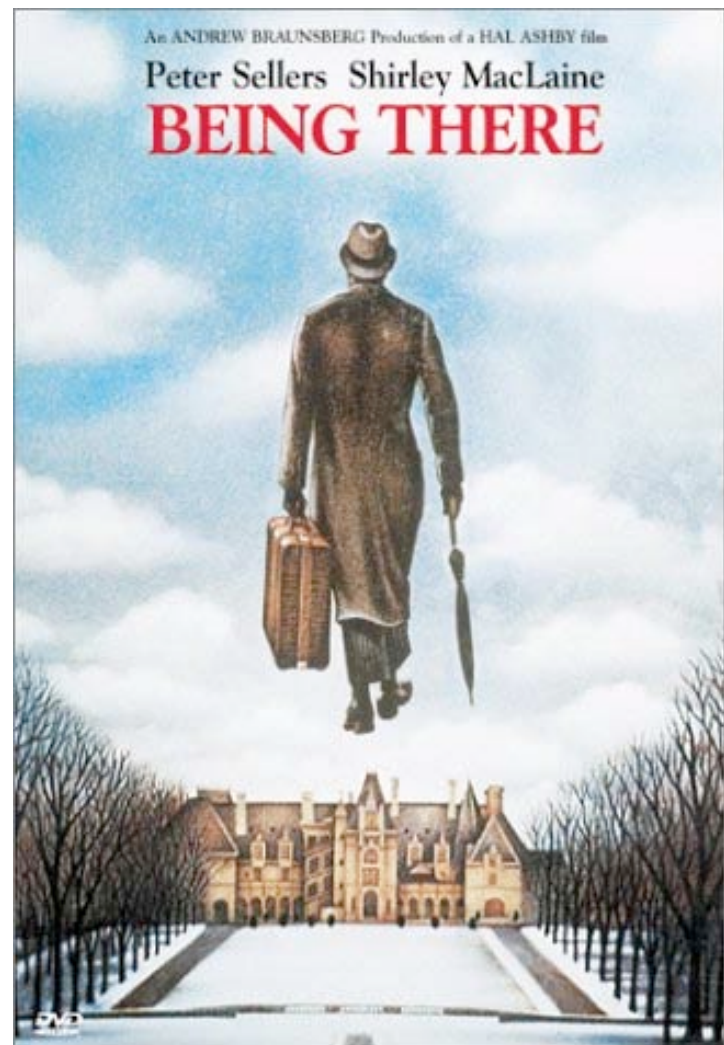
Peter Sellers...Chance  
Shirley MacLaine...Eve Rand  
Melvyn Douglas...Benjamin Rand  
Jack Warden...President 'Bobby'  
Richard Dysart...Dr. Robert Allenby  
Richard Basehart...Vladimir Skrapinov  
Ruth Attaway...Louise  
David Clennon...Thomas Franklin  
Fran Brill...Sally Hayes  
Denise DuBarry...Johanna  
Oteil Burbridge...Lolo  
Ravenell Keller III...Abbaz  
Hal Ashby...Man at file cabinet at the Washington Post

**Hal Ashby** (2 September 1929, Ogden, Utah—27 December 1988, Malibu, California, cancer) directed 13 films, among which were *8 Million Ways to Die* (1986), *Second-Hand Hearts* (1981), *Being There* (1979), *Coming Home* (1978), *Bound for Glory* (1976), *Shampoo* (1975), *The Last Detail* (1973), *Harold and Maude* (1971) and *The Landlord* (1970). Before directing, he edited six films, some of which were *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967; best editing Oscar). *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965) and *The Loved One* (1965).

**Caleb Deschanel** (21 September 1944, Philadelphia) has shot 21 films, the most recent of which is the IMAX *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2008). Some of the others are *National Treasure* (2004), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *The Patriot* (2000), *The Natural* (1984), *The Right Stuff* (1983), *Being There* (1979), *The Black Stallion* (1979), and *Trains* (1976). He has been nominated for five best cinematography Academy Awards

**Peter Sellers** (8 September 1925, Southsea, Hampshire, England—24 July 1980, London, heart attack) acted in 79 films and tv programs the last two of which were *The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1980) and *Being There* (1979). Some of the others were *Revenge of the Pink Panther* (1978), *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* (1976), *Murder by Death* (1976), *The Return of the Pink Panther* (1975), *The Magic Christian* (1969), *The Party* (1968), *Casino Royale* (1967), *What's New Pussycat* (1965), *The World of Henry Orient* (1964), *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *The Pink Panther* (1963),

March 18, 2008 (XVI:9)  
Hal Ashby, **BEING THERE** (1979, 130 min)



*Lolita* (1962), *I'm All Right Jack* (1959), *The Mouse That Roared* (1959; he played Grand Duchess Gloriana XII, Prime Minister Count Rupert Mountjoy and Tully Bascombe), *The Case of the Mukkinese Battle-Horn* (1956), *The Ladykillers* (1955) and *Let's Go Crazy* (1951; he played Groucho, Giuseppe, Cedric, Izzy, Gozzunkand Crystal Jollibottom).

**Shirley MacLaine** (24 April 1934, Richmond, Virginia) acted in 62 films and tv episodes, the most recent of which is the mini-series "Coco Chanel," now in production, in which she plays the lead. Some of her other films are *Bewitched* (2005), *Mrs. Winterbourne* (1996), *Postcards from the Edge* (1990), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Being There* (1979), *The Turning Point* (1977), *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970), *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (1964), *Irma la Douce* (1963), *Two for the Seesaw* (1962), *The Children's Hour* (1961), *The Apartment* (1960), *Some Came Running* (1958), and *The Trouble with Harry* (1955). She was nominated for six Oscars and won one—best actress in a leading role in *Terms of Endearment*.

**Melvyn Douglas** (5 April 1901, Macon, Georgia—4 August 1981, NYC, pneumonia and cardiac complications) appeared in 111 films and tv shows the last of which was *The Hot Touch* (1982). Some of the others were *Tell Me a Riddle* (1980), *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979), *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (1977), *The*

*Candidate* (1972), *I Never Sang for My Father* (1970), *Hotel* (1967), *The Americanization of Emily* (1964), *Hud* (1963), *Billy Budd* (1962), *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), *That Uncertain Feeling* (1941), *Ninotchka* (1939), *Captains Courageous* (1937), *Annie Oakley* (1935), *The Vampire Bat* (1933), *Tonight or Never* (1931), and all the great tv drama series of the 1950s. He won best supporting actor Oscars for his performances in *Being There* and *Hud*. He also won an Emmy and a Tony. His wife, Helen Gahagan, was elected to three terms in the House. Her political career ended when she was defeated for the Senate by red-baiting Richard M. Nixon in 1950.



**from *World Film Directors, V. II*. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Company, NY, 1988**

The American director was born in Ogden, Utah, where his father ran a dairy. His date of birth is given variously as 1930, 1932, and

1936. Ashby's childhood was troubled and insecure. Almost every one in Ogden except his own family were Mormons, and his parents were not happy together. Ashby was confused and disturbed at the age of five or six by their divorce, and traumatized by his father's suicide seven years later. He was surly at home and difficult at school, dropping out in his senior year.

According to Paul Fritzler in *Close-Up: The Contemporary Director*, Ashby "drifted from job to job and woman to woman. He was married and divorced twice by the time he was twenty-one. In 1953 he hitchhiked to Los Angeles. After he tried about fifty or sixty jobs—"You name it; I did it"—he ended up as a Multilith operator at the old Republic Pictures."

One day, "running off ninety or so copies of some page 14," it occurred to him that he wanted to make films himself. Everyone assured him that "the best school for a director is in the cutting room" and after much persistence, he was taken on as an apprentice cutter. He believes that his advisers were correct—that "when film comes into a cutting room, it holds all the work and efforts of everyone involved up to that point: the staging, writing, acting photography, sets, lighting, and sound. It is all there to be studied again and again and again, until you really know why it's good, or why it isn't."

What Ashby found hardest was the union rule that an apprenticeship lasts eight years, an ordeal by boredom and frustration that he believes has throttled a great deal of creative editorial talent. His first assignment as a fourth apprentice editor on William Wyler's *The Big Country* (1958). The chief editor was Robert Swink, who became Ashby's mentor. Swink taught him to "forget about the script, throw away all the so-called rules, and don't try to second-guess the director. Just look at the film and let it guide you. ...DON't be afraid of the film. You can cut it twenty-six different ways and, if none of these works, you can always put it back into daily form, and start over."

Ashby worked with Swink on his next four films and was allowed to edit a few sequences of the last of these, *The Best Man* (1964). He moved up to assistant editor on *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and to chief editor on Tony Richardson's *The Loved One* (1965); he had completed first cut when Richardson unexpectedly left to complete the editing in London. A period of depression and unemployment followed, and then Ashby was introduced to the director Norman Jewison, who needed an editor for *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965). He and Jewison got along exceptionally well, and the director used him again on *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming* (1966), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), and *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968). Ashby says that Jewison "let me select and cut his films as I felt it. It was an editor's dream and, in the end, it brought me two Academy nominations and one Oscar for *In the Heat of the Night*."

Jewison made Ashby his associate producer—all-purpose assistant—on *Gaily, Gaily* (1969). The director then became interested in Bill Gunn's script *The Landlord*. Finding that he could not fit it into his schedule, he offered to produce it if Ashby would care to direct. When Ashby had finished "doing a dance around the office," they settled down to persuade the Mirisch Brothers and United Artists to gamble \$2 million on an untried director.

Reasonably confident about the technical aspects of his task, Ashby became increasingly uncertain of his ability to handle actors. As the first day of shooting loomed after a week of rehearsals, he worked (and scared) himself "into a state of walking pneumonia." For the first three days he was "just gasping

all day and pointing a lot.” Finding that he could nevertheless communicate with his cast, “he enjoyed it from that point on.”

*The Landlord* (1970) was based on a novel by Kristin Hunter. It is a comedy about a rich white man, Elgar Enders (Beau Bridges), who at the age of twenty-one “runs away” from his Long Island mansion and buys a Brooklyn tenement in the promising ghetto of Park Slope. His plan is to evict the black tenants and turn the place into a fashionable pad for himself. The tenants, however, refuse either to move out or pay rent, and start to lay voodoo spells on him.

Before long he finds himself drawn into their lives, so violently different from his own. There is Fanny (Diana Sands), wretchedly married to the brutish Copee (Lou Gosset), who takes refuge in an affair with Enders; a free-school teacher (Melvin Stewart) struggling to instill racial pride in his students and the black earth mother Marge (Pearl Bailey), who undertakes Enders’ education in street wisdom. Marki Bey plays Lanie, a mulatto disco dancer who bridges the film’s two worlds and provides Enders with the possibility of a happy ending. Having rejected his own social group, Enders is rejected in turn by the ghetto, and moves out to live with Lanie and his baby by Fanny.

Compared to these passionate, hurt, and sometimes dangerous people, Enders’ family are caricatures out of a screwball comedy. Lee Grant is splendid as his imbecile mother, whose struggle for racial equality is limited to viewing *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* His sister, Susan Anspach, is a spaced-out deb about to marry into napalm. To underline the contrast between Enders’ two worlds, Ashby had his cinematographer Gordon Willis underexpose the Brooklyn scenes and over expose the Long Island ones, making the ghetto seem darker and more richly colored than reality, life in the mansion brighter and frothier.

These extreme contrasts of tone and image threaten to pull the film apart, and its cohesion is further undermined, as Paul Fritzer says, by “the flashy editing, fragmented narrative, flash-forwards, repeater shots, and straight-to-the-camera soliloquies.” Nevertheless, for Fritzer, “Ashby made it all work in a film that is both hilarious and haunting.” A few reviewers were irritated by this “stylistic slickness,” attributed by one to the influence of Norman Jewison, but most shared Fritzer’s enthusiasm, praising the performances the tyro director had drawn from his players, and calling this “a comedy of more than usual bite and vigor.”

Carl Dubiclay, writing in *Film Reader* (1, 1975), suggested that the main theme in all of Ashby’s films is “how do we live?—not only a simple question...[but] an exhortation to examine our own lives and, in a large part, to change them.” As Dubiclay says, this question central to *The Landlord*, is answered “in terms of an individualistic choice rather than a group solution” to the problem of race.

*The Landlord* was too offbeat a movie to make much impression at the box office, but its critical reception was good enough to bring Ashby an even more less conventional script from Paramount. This was *Harold and Maude*, written by Colin Higgins as his thesis for a masters degree. Like Elgar Enders, Harold is a poor little rich boy with an appalling mother (Vivian Pickles). In late adolescence, pallid and wide-eyed, he is played by Bud Cort with a mixture of bewilderment and defiance that reminded David Robinson of Harry Langdon. Since the day he was mistakenly reported dead and wrung a flash of concern from his ice-cold mother, Harold has dedicated himself to faking more or less spectacular suicides—setting fire to himself or hanging himself from the drawing room chandelier (“I suppose you think

that’s very amusing,” snaps his mother, passing through.)

Harold’s other pastime is attending funerals in his private hearse, and at one graveside he meets Maude (Ruth Gordon). She is seventy-nine, but her spirit is as free as Harold’s is stifled. She paints, sculpts, collects smells, saves trees from pollution, and steals cars to remind people of the vanity of possessions. Harold goes to bed with her, recovers his will to live, and plans marriage. Maude has other ideas. On her eightieth birthday, having enjoyed a sufficiency of life, she takes an overdose. Harold fakes his last suicide, running his car off a cliff, and walks off into the future strumming the banjo Maude had given him.

On its release in 1971, *Harold and Maude* was received with indifference or active distaste by the major reviewers. Afterwards, however, it slowly developed a cult reputation, especially among young people. It was so constantly revived in art houses that in 1978 Seattle-based Specialty Films made new prints and booked the film around the country, and this time it was greeted as a “contemporary classic” and “a work of art.” There are nevertheless some critics who, while relishing Harold’s black comedy, find the sixties-type dialogue and music (by Cat Stevens) dated, and Maude’s character and philosophizing whimsical and sentimental. David Thomson wrote: “The love story is prettified and sanitary: there is no real sex between Bud Cort and Ruth Gordon. It slips away into another feeble endorsement of ‘do your own thing,’ the politics of the weary soul-searcher, too selfish and superficial to deal with public causes.”

In 1973 Ashby was hired by MGM to direct a film starring Jack Nicholson. He walked out on that project when the studio turned down his choice of female lead, and Nicholson walked out with him, proposing as an alternative a screen version of Darryl Ponicsan’s novel *The Last Detail*. Columbia took the film on, Robert Towne wrote the excellent adaptation, and the movie was shot by Michael Chapman on location, partly at a military base near Toronto.

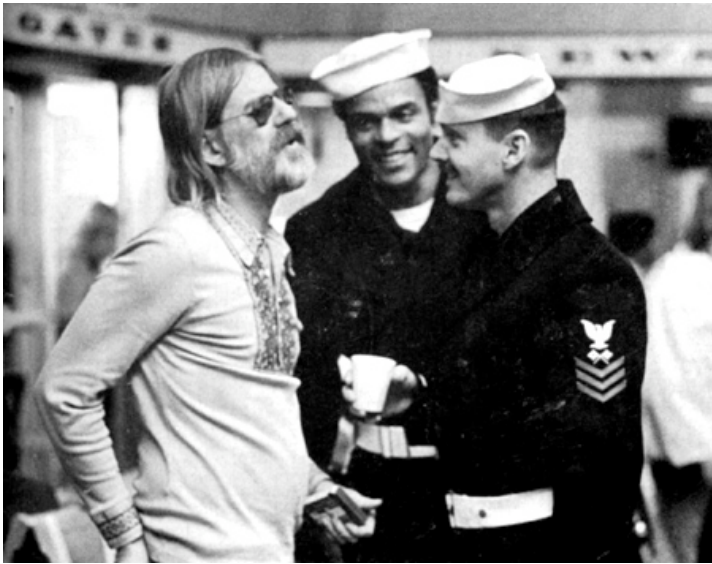
Jack Nicholson plays Bad-Ass Buddusky—a bantam, foulmouthed, Navy petty officer at a Virginia transit camp. With his black buddy Mule Mulhall (Otis Young), he is assigned to escort Meadows (Randy Quaid), a kleptomaniac young sailor, to the naval prison in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Meadows has been given eight years for pilfering forty dollars from charity collection box—the charity being one dear to his CO’s wife. The escorts’ plan is to deliver their prisoner as rapidly as possible in order to live it up on expenses on the way back. However, appalled at the savagery of Meadows’ sentence and by his mooncalf innocence, they decide instead to give him a taste of all that he’ll be missing in the brig: his first drunk, his first fight, his first lay.

It is, as John Coleman wrote, “hardly a sentimental education. And yet, as....conveyed by glances, gestures, silences, the clichés of ‘being a man’—below-decks style—are reanimated, sweetened, lent value.” Richard Combs pointed out that the central drama “opens into an elusive, symbolic play on many kinds of human and specifically American, experience....Gradually, with a many-layered irony, the film reveals the trap in which the two guards, as much as their prisoner, willingly confine themselves. Scornful of the relief and resignation they see in Meadows’ unprotesting attitude (‘Secretly he’s glad...this way the worst is over already’), they themselves have happily traded insecurity for the rigid structures of the navy.”

Writing in the *International Film Guide* (1980), Diane Jacobs said that *The Last Detail* “is the film that made Ashby a talent to reckon with. Full of green and yellow military/motel

colours, of quiet dissolves from one grey landscape to another, of tight framing in which anything beyond the proximate seems blurred and unreal, it is a bleak-looking film.... The lives we observe are unremittingly constricted; and the sanguineness of the martial tunes that accompany the three men on their odyssey is a counterpoint that underscores this bitter reality. Movement is a dominant motif here, but the movement is away from rather than towards freedom." The rhythmic montage editing that Ashby used in his first two films is here dispensed with, as Carl Dubiclay says: "The dissolve has replaced the cut, and the radical compression of time that took place in Ashby's editing is reduced.... This shift in technique is symptomatic of Ashby's shift in emphasis... from issue to character. The question is still 'how do we live,' but Ashby now investigates the characters working out this question instead of exploring the question itself."

According to Paul Fritzler, *The Last Detail's* realistically obscene language greatly worried the Columbia executives, who feared that they would not be able to sell the film to television. It might not have been released at all if it had not scored a major success at the 1974 Cannes Film Festival, where Nicholson was voted the best actor. Columbia eventually distributed the picture, but with minimal promotion. It was very well received by American critics also, and earned Oscar nominations for its screenplay and for the performances of Nicholson and Randy Quaid. Many consider it Ashby's best film. Skillfully edited by Jerry Ayres, it was shown in 1976 on ABC-TV, the sound track "scrubbed almost clean. Questioning the propriety of this increasingly common procedure, John J. O' Connor wrote that the expurgated version "is not bad, but it is not the production seen by movie audiences."



After that, Ashby was signed by the producers Saul Zaentz and Michael Douglas to direct *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but resigned in a disagreement over the script. Milos Forman took over the film and Ashby immediately went to work on *Shampoo* (1976), produced for Persky-Bright Associates by Warren Beatty, who originated the project, starred in it, and scripted it in collaboration with Robert Towne.

*Shampoo* deals with some forty-eight hours in the life of George (Warren Beatty), a talented, ambitious, and handsome hairdresser in a fashionable Los Angeles salon. Engaged to the naive Jill (Goldie Hawn), he cannot resist going to bed with his

eager customers: it really does make George happy to make women happy. One of these fortunate ladies is Felicia (Lee Grant), the rapacious wife of Lester (Jack Warden), a corrupt tycoon from whom George is trying to borrow the money to start his own salon. In the course of the film, George resumes his affair with Jackie (Julie Christie), who is Lester's mistress and Jill's best friend, and satisfies the sexual curiosity of Lester's teenaged daughter (Carrie Fisher). In the end, not even George's quick wits and fast motorbike can avoid disaster, and the whole fabric of deception and self-deception comes crashing down around him.

George's escapes and escapades are the stuff of Restoration farce, but the narrative is put into a satirical context by the fact that it opens on the eve of the 1968 election that brought Richard Nixon to the Presidency. Fritzler says that *Shampoo* was "the first film nostalgically to mine the late 1960s, 'evoking the generation gap, miniskirts, the Beatles, strobe lights, Spiro Agnew's hypocritical holiness, and the dizzying hysterical freedom of the beginnings of the sexual revolution.'"

The picture by no means escaped criticism. The attempt to equate the moral bankruptcy of the "beautiful people" with Nixon's election seemed to some critics unconvincing and pretentious, and many thought the final scenes a copout, demanding a degree of sympathy for the bereft George that he had not earned. All in all, however, *Shampoo* was enthusiastically received by the critics, praised for its script, a gallery of excellent performances, Paul Simon's score, and "its awful seductiveness, a money-scented, high-colour gloss that owed a lot to Laszlo Kovacs' photography and Richard Sylbert's sets." For Pauline Kael, it was "the most virtuoso example of sophisticated, kaleidoscopic farce that American moviemakers have ever come up with."

Lee Grant collected an Oscar as best supporting actress, and *Shampoo* was a smash hit at the box office—Ashby's first—earning him a contract from United Artists to direct *Bound for Glory* (1976), a \$7 million biopic of Woody Guthrie, who wrote "This Land is Your Land" and influenced successive generations of singers from Ramblin' Jack Elliot to Bob Dylan and on. United Artists had already spent four years and a great deal of money on the project, and had finally acquired a workable script by Robert Getchell, based on Guthrie's own autobiography. Ashby added some scenes filling in more of the social background and reportedly improvised a good deal of dialogue. He also won a battle with the studio to cast, as Guthrie, the notoriously "difficult" David Carradine—a choice that in the end was generally applauded.

The film opens in 1936 in Pampa, Texas, where Guthrie is trying to support his wife (Melinda Dillon) and two children as a sign-painter and part-time musician. The Dust Bowl town empties as people strike out for California, and Guthrie joins the exodus, hopping freight trains and hitching rides through a Depression America of grim poverty and brutal exploitation. In a California shanty town of migrant crop pickers, Guthrie's talent is discovered by a local singer and union organizer, Ozark Blue (Ronnie Cox).

Blue soon has him playing and singing on the radio. He breaks off his affair with rich Gail Strickland and sends for his family, but antagonizes his sponsors by singing protest songs. Guthrie moves on again to sing to the workers in the San Joaquin Valley, returning bloody but unbowed to offers from CBS and the Coconut Grove. Auditioning for the latter, he overhears talk of "a simple hillbilly presentation" and walks out. We last see him back on the boxcars, singing his way into legend.

Pauline Kael wrote that *Bound for Glory* is "superbly

lighted and shot [by Haskell Wexler] and has the visual beauty of a great movie,” but that unfortunately the filmmakers had been seduced by Guthrie’s own tendency to mythicize himself as “the voice of the downtrodden.” Most critics agreed, Clancy Sigal saying that “Woody makes an awkward Jesus figure. He abandoned his wife, picked up loose women, drank too much and could be infuriatingly irresponsible. Robert Getchell’s script defuses the real Guthrie by implying it was all in the name of People’s Art, of his refusal to conform to middle-class values.” This did not prevent *Bound for Glory* obtaining an Oscar for best photography and nominations for best picture and best screenplay, but the film was not successful at the box office.

*Coming Home* was initiated by Jane Fonda and Bruce Gilbert, whose work for the antiwar movement had awakened their concern for the plight of crippled Vietnam veterans. A script was written by Nancy Dowd, Jerome Hellman was engaged to produce, and John Schlesinger to direct. Waldo Salt worked on a revision of the Dowd script until a heart attack ended his involvement. There was no complete script when Ashby took over from Schlesinger and filming began. For a time, the director was shooting by day and writing by night in collaboration with his former editor, Robert Jones. According to Paul Fritzlner, shooting was actually halted at times for a day of improvisation by the cast, the results of which were then fed into the script.

What came out of this exhausting and nerve-wracking procedure was a story set (like *Shampoo*) in Los Angeles in 1968. Fonda plays the wife of a hawkish Marine officer (Bruce Dern). When he goes off to Vietnam, she dutifully volunteers for work at the veteran’s hospital. The forgotten and embittered men she meets there change her from a conventional military wife into a committed and liberated woman, who has her first orgasm with a paraplegic (Jon Voigt). By the time her husband comes home, deranged by war, she and her lover are activists in the antiwar campaign. Learning from FBI snoopers of his wife’s infidelity, the husband marches into the sea.

Fonda, Voigt, and the screenplay all got Oscars, and there were nominations for best picture, best director, and best supporting actor and actress. Some thought *Coming Home* Ashby’s best picture, and it was financially successful. But for the first time, an Ashby movie seriously divided the critics. David Thomson called it “a movie that looks like a TV commercial...as adolescent and decadent a film as Hollywood has released in many years.”

What incensed critics like Thomson and Andrew Tudor is, as the latter wrote, that the film “operates in a political vacuum: a simple cry of anguish at the personal price that war has demanded....*Coming Home* is the sort of soft-centered movie which one might have expected ten years ago....In the end, and for all its evident qualities, *Coming Home* succumbs to its own style, to its insistence on presenting a coherent, ordered and ‘realistic’ story....Ashby’s film, though it does personalize the impact of Vietnam with more than a little skill, is finally no real advance on the definitive movie in that idiom: Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives*.”

Ashby went on to direct *Being There* (1979), scripted by Jerzy Kosinski and Robert Jones from Kosinski’s novel, and produced by Andrew Braunsberg for Lorimar. Peter Sellers, in his last great role, plays Chance, a middle-aged simpleton raised by a mysterious guardian, whom he serves as gardener. Chance has never left the Old Man’s estate, his only contact with the outside world being the television that occupies all his leisure hours. Then the Old Man dies and Chance is cast out of his garden into the

wilderness of Washington, DC. Threatened by hooligans, he reflexively moves the switch of the TV remote control he has salvaged to “Off.”



More fortunately, he is knocked down by a limousine and taken home by its owner, Eve Rand (Shirley MacLaine): Eve! She lives in a grand mansion with her dying billionaire husband Ben (Melvyn Douglas), a political *eminence grise*. Chance the gardener, misheard, becomes Chauncey Gardiner, impeccably Wasp. What is more, his simple horticultural utterances are perceived as profound comments on the state of the nation—not only by his hosts but by their friends, who include the President of the United States (Jack Warden). Soon he is a household name, a television pundit, and a candidate himself for the Presidency. We last see him walking on water, or apparently so, as if this lobotomized Adam were, after all, the Messiah.

*Being There* provoked excited debate among psychologists, church leaders, and television pundits. It was so successful that it achieved second release within a year, and many film critics shared the general excitement. David Robinson praised it as a richly entertaining satirical fable, skillfully sustained throughout its 130 minutes, though “the strain begins to tell before the end.” Robinson thought it “a nice conceit to suppose a being formed out of the bland inoffensive nullity of diet of television,” and enjoyed the “goodhumoured jibes at the expense of the political mind helplessly vulnerable to the unmitigated platitude.” Once again, however, there were some who actively disliked the film. Nigel Andrews, for example, called it “modern cinema at its most machine-made, its stiff-limbed automatism doled up with an all-purpose, spray-on prettiness of photography....It’s a dead, dire desolate movie.”

Ashby’s next two films, both from Lorimar, were both failures. *Second-Hand Hearts* (1980), from an old script by Charles Eastman, was originally called *The Hamster of Happiness* and was actually completed before *Being There*, its release being held up by a dispute between Lorimar and United Artists. It has Barbara Harris as a would-be saloon singer in El Paso and Robert Blake as the loser she marries in a drunken moment, before setting out with him and her three kids for California. A road movie of “garrulous eccentricity,” this seemed to Richard Combs “very much a writer’s film.” David Denby thought that Ashby had directed it “with astonishingly little feeling for what holds an audience.”

The reviewers were no kinder to *Lookin’ to Get Out* (1982),

written by Al Schwartz in collaboration with Jon Voigt. The latter appears as Alex Kovac, a small-time New York gambler with more than a touch of the Damon Runyons. He and his buddy Jerry (Burt Young) take off for Las Vegas to escape their creditors and recoup their fortunes. “Any viewer could bet the farm that *Lookin’ to Get Out* will hold no surprises,” wrote Richard Corliss. “Alex and Jerry will run a blackjack scam: they will win more than they hoped, lose more than they know, Ann-Margaret...will keep moving provocatively, to sidestep the carnage. The film was shot two-and-a-half years ago and Director Ashby has spent much of the time since then fine-tuning the editing. The effort shows, but not the effect: the picture is a sloppy mess that stumbles toward oblivion like a drunk on a losing streak.” Also released in 1982 was *Let’s Spend the Night Together*, Ashby’s excellent filmed record of the Rolling Stones’ 1981 American tour. *The Slugger’s Wife* (1984), constructed perhaps on the theory that more is more, attempted to combine rock ‘n’ roll, baseball, and Neil Simon. The latter’s script, which reviewers found amazingly unfunny, concerns the problems of a two-career marriage. Both careers are glamorous and both careerists very young. He (Michael O’Keefe) is a major-league bonus baby who can’t hit unless his wife is cheering from the stands, and she (Rebecca de Mornay) is an aspiring singer who would rather be cutting a hit record of her own. David Sterritt thought the real mismatch was between the film’s writer and its director. “The characters speak their Simonized lines earnestly and correctly,” he observed, “while Ashby’s camerawork and editing tricks do spacey pirouettes all around them, throbbing to the beat of a rock score....It’s not a winning combination.” Most critics restricted their praise to the supporting performances of Randy Quaid and Cleavant Derricks, as teammates, and of Martin Ritt, as their dyspeptic manager. But neither these assets nor the movie’s other attractions—which included eighteen pop songs, brief appearances by professional ballplayers and musicians, and some excruciating *double entendres*—could save the day at the box office.

*8 Million Ways to Die* (1986), about the drug-dealing night world of Los Angeles, is based on the mystery novels of Lawrence Sanders, with a screenplay by Oliver Stone, who wrote such other drug-traffic movies as *Midnight Express*, *Scarface*, and *Year of the Dragon*. Jeff Bridges stars as Matthew Scudder, a seedy, alcoholic detective with a sense of honor who becomes involved in a trail of crime and ugliness. Asked to come to an unfamiliar mansion in Malibu, a gambling club or brothel or both, he meets a frightened prostitute who asks his help and whose he becomes bent upon avenging. David Denby commented that Ashby “brings a shaggy narrative looseness” to this crime-thriller material, creating “some of the most raffish and entertaining scenes in recent American movies.” But other critics found the film a dismaying failure. Pauline Kael wrote that *8 Million Ways to Die* is “pulpier and trashier than you might expect from Ashby....Plot points don’t connect, as though they didn’t matter”; and Gene Siskel described the movie as “a boring, pointless thriller.” The saddest aspect of the film, he concluded, “is that it represents the continuing decline of Hal Ashby, once one of America’s best [directors].”

Ashby has evidently hit a losing streak. The darling of the liberal critics in the early 1970s, he presumably earned their later hostility by making a series of worthy, expert, and highly successful films showing that he was, after all, neither a political radical nor an *auteur*. In spite of his uneven record in recent years, he remains a fine craftsman—a masterly director of actors, with a rare sense of montage and a genuine narrative gift.

**from *Senses of Cinema* “Hal Ashby” by Darren Hughes**  
<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/04/ashby.html>

For Ashby, the great challenge of *Being There* was sustaining its absurd premise for two hours without allowing it to slip, even for a moment, into farce. “This is the most delicate film I’ve ever worked with as an editor,” he told Aljean Harmetz. “The balance is just incredible. It could be ruined in a second if you allow it to become too broad. Peter’s character is a sponge. He imitates everything he sees on television and everyone he meets. In one scene, he imitated the voice of a homosexual. It was very funny, but we couldn’t allow it. It would have destroyed the balance.” Ashby’s film, like Sellers himself, plays the comedy straight-faced, refusing to rob the character of his allegoric simplicity by making of it little more than a cheap joke. Chance is, instead, the ultimate straight man, a *tabula rasa* against which his associates’ ridiculous behaviour might be exposed. In the film’s funniest scene, Eve (Shirley MacLaine)—the wealthy, sex-starved woman who first tempts Chance into the world of earthly delights—tries to seduce her guest while he watches a passionate romance on television. When the program ends, however, Chance is no longer able to imitate the “appropriate” behaviour and so he flips the channel, leaving Eve confused and frustrated. “I like to watch,” he tells her, which sends Eve to the floor unaware that Chance is standing on his head, just like the woman on television. Self-indulgence and superficiality have never seemed more absurd.

*Being There* is a strangely fitting conclusion to Ashby’s enviable run during the 1970s. Commenting on Kosinski’s prescient novel, Barbara Tapa Lupack writes, “while Kosinski did not live to witness the Chance-like candidacy of H. Ross Perot, conducted largely via television time purchased with his own millions, he must surely have appreciated the irony of actor Ronald Reagan’s two telegenic terms in office as well as understudy George Bush’s subsequent lacklustre performance in the White House. Ashby’s career, like so many of his contemporaries, was derailed by sweeping changes in Washington, D.C., in Hollywood and in America at large. The studios, now on the lookout for blockbuster box office returns and wary of signing over creative control to “cost no object” directors, turned their attention away from smaller, more personal films like Ashby’s. Reagan’s America likewise awoke to a “new morning”, conventionally ignoring the traumatic events that had defined the previous decades. For Ashby, who had embodied the country’s counter cultural spirit in thought and deed, the “Me Decade” must have been catastrophically disheartening. In an era of conservative piety and institutionalised greed, Ashby’s politically motivated irreverence and his simple faith in humanity’s potential for radical change were suddenly an anachronism.

**“Peter Sellers Masterpiece *Being There* The Greatest Movie You’ve Never Seen”**  
<http://www.geocities.com/~cheshyre/being.html>

In 1971, Jerzy Kosinski published the novel *Being There*. Soon afterwards he received a telegram from its lead character, Chance the Gardener: “Available in my garden or outside of it.” A telephone number followed and when Kosinski dialed it Peter Sellers answered.

For years afterwards, Sellers would try to get this film made.



"That's me!" he would tell people of the Chance character. He hawked the idea of a film to whomever he could find. Finally, in 1979, with the clout he had gained from the *Pink Panther* series, he was able to fulfill his dream.

What followed was the culmination of Peter Sellers' career: a masterpiece of double-edged satire on politics and television. But Kosinski's screenplay goes deeper than that. What he and director Hal Ashby expose is a self-serving and self-deceived society. Through the innocence of the Chance character, all the schemes and manipulations of the world are laid bare for what they are: pure folly. For those who hunger for the truths in life, this is a film that will satisfy your appetite.

...I'm the guy who played the White House cop in *Being There*. It was fun to find my name in a Web cite. Some trivia notes: No one on the set was allowed to wear green or purple...Sellers considered them unlucky colors and he was living on borrowed time because of his deteriorating heart condition.

**Edward Neuert, review of JERZY KOSINSKI: A BIOGRAPHY By James Park Sloan, Dutton.**  
<http://www.salon.com/10/sneakpeeks/sneakpeeks7.html>

Say what you will about Jerzy Kosinski's fiction, his life was undeniably fascinating -- most often made so by his own diligent and inventive hustling. If you accepted Kosinski's own account, you believed he survived a childhood in war-torn Poland, where he was separated from his parents, on the run from Nazi occupiers and so horribly abused by local peasants that he was, for a time, struck dumb. After emigrating to the U.S. in the late fifties, he swiftly published two works of socio-political nonfiction, then broke through with "The Painted Bird," a novel he strongly suggested was based on his wartime autobiography. Eight other novels followed, including the 1969 National Book Award-winning "Steps" and later "Being There."

Kosinski's fame arrived at a time when the Jet Set was just reaching cruising altitude; he became an enthusiastic frequent flyer. He displayed his considerable gifts as a raconteur on "The Tonight Show," and partied endlessly with the biggest names in the Lit crowd. He dabbled in movies (playing Lenin's pal Zinoviev in "Reds") and politics. And he took pleasure in

spreading tales of his dark side: Kosinski the Master of Disguise prowling Manhattan's underworld at night, reveling in the sex clubs that flourished in the days when sex didn't have to be safe, just fun.

But as James Park Sloan recounts in his new biography, Kosinski's frantic life hid a secret: he did not, strictly speaking, write his books by himself. When *The Village Voice* published, in 1982, the revelation that Kosinski had for years been discretely employing "editors" to polish his poorly written first drafts, his reputation was forever tarnished. Further investigation revealed that Kosinski had the bad manners to pay his collaborators poorly; that his waif-on-the-run story had been taken from, among other sources, the real life of his fellow Pole Roman Polanski; and that he had largely cribbed the plot of "Being There" from a Polish novel of the 1930s. Kosinski limped along, a vastly diminished figure on the edge of his former world, until his suicide in 1991.

It is clear now that Kosinski's most energetic construction was his life, and Sloan's daunting task has been to untangle fiction from facts purposefully obscured for decades. He does this patiently and thoroughly, albeit with a more workmanlike prose style than you'd wish. Kosinski's most useful personal discovery may have been, as Sloan puts it, that "a writer's books. . . are only part of the product. The real -- the ultimate -- product was himself, and the books were, among other things, a vehicle for selling that product." Certainly others -- Hemingway and Mailer come to mind -- have seemed to lead their lives by this rule; it was Kosinski's misfortune that he tried to take self-aggrandizement one step too far. He lost control of his best story.



**Michael Dare: How the last shot in *Being There* actually got made** <http://www.dareland.com/lastshot.htm>

The script for *Being There* ends as both Peter Sellers and Shirley MacLaine take walks in the wood. They run into each other. She says "I was looking for you, Chance." He says "I was looking for you too." They take hands and walk off together.

But near the end of production, somebody went up to Hal and said "How's it going?"

"Great," Hal said. "Sellers has created this character that's so amazing, I could have him walk on water and people would believe it." Hal stopped and thought. "As a matter of fact, I will have him walk on water."

Hal was out on location, miles from Hollywood. The last thing on earth he needed was to contact the home office to discuss the idea of Chance walking on water. It's an idea that wouldn't pitch

or read well. If it had been in the script, there would have been endless arguments over what this Jesus allegory was doing in the picture. Only if you've actually seen the film do you realize that it's not a Jesus allegory at all. Chance can walk on water because nobody ever told him he couldn't, not because he's the resurrection of Christ.

Hal knew he could make it work, just as he knew that there was no way in hell the studio would approve of more money for such a controversial shot that wasn't even in the script. He decided to do it anyway.

First, he called Robert Downey, who had a scene in *Greaser's Palace* where the main character walked on water. Hal knew that Downey didn't have a lot of money, so he asked for advice on how to do it. Downey told him it was simple. Just go to an airport, get a certain kind of platform, and place it in the water. Hal followed Downey's advice and got the shot for less than \$10,000.

Second, he had to deal with keeping the shot a secret. There was this one, very well dressed kid around the set who was officially called a PA, but whom Hal suspected of being the studio spy. Hal called him into his office and read him the riot act.

"I'm going to ask you to make a decision right now that's going to affect the rest of your life," he told the kid. "I'm going to ask you to decide whose side you're on. I know you've been watching me because you want to learn how to make movies. I also know you're watching me to make reports to the studio behind my back. I'm about to change the end of this movie because I've come up with a better one. The studio can't know about it or they'll shut me down. This is it, kid. Decide. Are you on the side of art or commerce?"

The kid kept his mouth shut. The shot got made. The studio was pissed but they used the shot anyway. Hal didn't give them a choice. He didn't even shoot the ending in the script.

#### Why the film was released with two different endings

Hal always wanted to use a series of outtakes for the final credits. Obviously that's one of the things you have to do at the last minute, because until the final edit is locked down you don't know what the outtakes are. So Hal handed in the film with the TV commercial ending just to get the film in on deadline, then got to work on the outtakes ending.

When he tried to hand it in, the studio refused to accept it or send it out. The film opened small, to just a half dozen theaters. Hal personally went to each theater, went to the projection booth, knocked on the door and said to the projectionist "Hi, I'm Hal Ashby, the director of the film. The studio put in the wrong ending, but I've got the right one with me. How about if we edit it in?" The projectionists were all thrilled to meet him and gladly

helped him out.

When the studio found out, they got the last laugh. Hal's contract specifically stated that he was to be paid his director's fee "upon proper delivery of a completed film." They didn't consider receiving a film with two endings "proper delivery," and they used that as an excuse not to pay him. Ten years later, when I first met Hal, he still hadn't gotten paid for directing *Being There*.



#### JUST FIVE MORE IN THE SPRING 2008 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS:

- Mar 25 Sydney Pollack TOOTSIE (1982)
- Apr 1 Krzysztof Kieslowski THE DOUBLE LIFE OF VERONIQUE (1991)
- Apr 8 Jane Campion THE PIANO (1993)
- Apr 15 Clint Eastwood UNFORGIVEN (1992)
- Apr 22 Ingmar Bergman THE SEVENTH SEAL (1957)

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