All About Eve received 14 Academy Award nominations and won 6 of them: picture, director, supporting actor, sound, screenplay, costume design. It probably would have won two more if four members of the cast hasn’t been in direct competition with one another: Davis and Baxter for Best Actress and Celeste Holm and Thelma Ritter for Best Supporting Actress. The story is that the studio tried to get Baxter to go for Supporting but she refused because she already had one of those and wanted to move up. Years later, the same story goes, she allowed as maybe she made a bad career move there and Bette Davis allowed as she was finally right about something.

Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz
Written by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (screenplay) Mary Orr (story "The Wisdom of Eve", uncredited)
Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck
Music Alfred Newman
Cinematography Milton R. Krasner
Film Editing Barbara McLean
Art Direction George W. Davis and Lyle R. Wheeler
Set Decoration Thomas Little and Walter M. Scott

Cast
Bette Davis…Margo Channing
Anne Baxter…Eve Harrington
George Sanders…Addison DeWitt
Celeste Holm…Karen Richards
Gary Merrill…Bill Simpson
Hugh Marlowe…Lloyd Richards
Gregory Ratoff…Max Fabian
Barbara Bates…Phoebe
Marilyn Monroe…Miss Casswell
Thelma Ritter…Birdie Coonan
Walter Hampden…Aged Actor
Randy Stuart…Girl
Craig Hill…Leading Man
Leland Harris…Doorman
Barbara White…Autograph Seeker

Eddie Fisher…Stage Manager
William Pullen…Clerk
Claude Stroud…Pianist
Eugene Borden…Frenchman
Helen Mowery…Reporter
Steven Geray…Captain of Waiters

Joseph L. Mankiewicz (b. February 11, 1909 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania—d. February 5, 1993, age 83, in Bedford, New York) started in the film industry translating intertitle cards for Paramount in Berlin. He became a screenwriter for Paramount, then went to MGM, left there when Louis B. Mayer got mad at him because of his affair with Judy Garland, then went to Fox and worked as a producer for Darryl F. Zanuck. He got his directing break when Ernst Lubitsch took sick and was unable to direct Dragonwyck (1946). After that very successful film, Mankiewicz directed 21 more, among them: (asterisk indicates he was also scriptwriter):
Alfred Newman (b. March 17, 1901 in New Haven, Connecticut—d. February 17, 1970, age 68, in Hollywood, Los Angeles, California) was a child prodigy by the age of eight. He derived his first income as an accompanist on piano in vaudeville, and in the orchestral pits of picture theatres. By the time Newman was twelve, he was supporting his entire family, which by now had moved to New York City. Newman worked his way up the ladder, conducting his first orchestra by age 17, consequently being tagged the boy conductor. By 1917, he had made his way to New York, conducting musicals on Broadway, beginning with "George White's Scandals". During his time on Broadway, Newman had become friends with several of the composers, including Gershwin (who he had known when the latter was still a song plugger at Remick’s Music Store) and Irving Berlin, who would be the catalyst for Newman’s Hollywood career. At the instigation of Irving Berlin, who first made the suggestion to the head of United Artists, Joseph M. Schenck, Newman was invited to Hollywood in 1930 to arrange and score Berlin’s comedy Reaching for the Moon (1930). United Artists then signed him to a seven-year contract, from 1931 to 1938. Producer Darryl F. Zanuck became so enamored with his work, that he coaxed him into joining the newly formed 20th Century Fox. His subsequent tenure at Fox, both as composer and as musical director, spanned the years 1938 to 1959. During this time, he became the studio’s most prodigious Academy Award winner. He was one of two film composers to have received four Oscar nominations in the same year - the other being Victor Young, who achieved it twice. Nominated for an Academy Award 20 years in succession, from 1938 to 1957. This includes a nine-year stretch from 1938 to 1946 in which he was nominated for at least two different movie scores in each of those years. During his long career in Hollywood totaling 250 films, Alfred Newman was nominated for a staggering thirty-six Academy Awards. In 1940 he earned four nominations for four different films. Nine times, he took home the gold statue: Alexander’s Ragtime Band (1938), Tin Pan Alley (1940), The Song of Bernadette (1943), Mother Wore Tights (1947), With a Song in My Heart (1952), Call Me Madam (1953), Love Is a Many Splendored Thing (1955), The King and I (1956) and Camelot (1967). For the next eighteen years, until his resignation in 1960, all of his musical scores would be for 20th Century Fox. Bernard Hermann said that the true genius of Newman in the Musical Director position was his ability to find and surround himself with an abundance of talent. Of Newman, Hermann said, “He did not write every note of the scores assigned and credited to him, as head of department he could not be expected to. He surrounded himself with an expert staff and was not afraid to delegate. Nor was he afraid to employ composers regarded by other studios as untrustworthy on account of their supposedly progressive inclinations” such as David Raksin [most famous for his haunting score of Laura (1944)], Hugo Friedhofer and Herrmann himself [whose scores for Alfred Hitchcock would cement his career in the 1950s]. John Williams also began his film career at twenty-six working as a pianist for Alfred Newman on South Pacific (1958). Newman was succeeded by his brother Lionel, composer and conductor, most famously on the Omen series and Alien (1979), as Musical Director for Fox. Perhaps most notably, Alfred E. Newman is known for being the gap-toothed icon of Mad Magazine when the editor saw a 1954 postcard of the composer with the caption, “What me worry?” Some of his impressive 229 composer credits include, Airport (1970, music composed by), Firecreek (1968), Nevada Smith (1966), The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), How the West Was Won (1962), Flower Drum Song (1961, uncredited), The Pleasure of His Company (1961), The Best of Everything (1959), The Diary of Anne Frank (1959), A Certain Smile (1958), The Bravados (1958, uncredited), The Gift of Love (1958), Anastasia (1956), Bus Stop (1956), The King and I (1956, uncredited), Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing (1955), The Seven Year Itch (1955), Daddy Long Legs (1955, uncredited), The Egyptian (1954), Hell and High Water (1954), The Robe (1953), The President's Lady (1953), Call Me Madam (1953, uncredited), Tonight We Sing.
Milton R. Krasner (b. February 17, 1904 in New York City, New York—d. July 16, 1988, age 84, in Woodland Hills, Los Angeles, California) entered the film industry as an assistant cameraman in 1917, and while working at the Vitagraph and Biograph studios in New York City was promoted to camera operator. Graduating to lighting cameraman in 1933, he was assigned mostly second features until the mid-'40s, when his excellence in black-and-white photography was finally recognized. Krasner hit his stride in the 1950s at 20th Century-Fox, where he photographed many of the studio's opulent Technicolor epics (Demetrius and the Gladiators (1954), Désirée (1954), The Rains of Ranchipur (1955), among others. First cameraman to win an Oscar for a film shot in widescreen for Three Coins in a Fountain, Cinemascope, (1954). He was nominated an additional 5 times for Best Cinematography for Fate Is the Hunter (1964), Love with the Proper Stranger (1963), How the West Was Won (1962), An Affair to Remember (1957), All About Eve (1950) and Arabian Nights (1942).

Bette Davis (b. Ruth Elizabeth Davis on April 5, 1908 in Lowell, Massachusetts—d. October 6, 1989, age 81, in Paris, France) won Best Actress Oscars for Jezebel (1938) and Dangerous (1934). She was also nominated for Best Actress for What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962), The Star (1952), All About Eve (1950), Mr. Skeffington (1944), Now, Voyager (1942), The Little Foxes (1941), The Letter (1940), Dark Victory (1940), and Of Human Bondage (1934). The American Film Institute gave her a Life Achievement Award in 1977. She was a top star in the 1930s and early 1940s, and then the pictures got weaker and weaker until she replaced Claudette Colbert (who had disc problems) in All About Eve, whereupon the roles improved for a while. Her work was so uneven in the 1950s that she eventually had no work at all, so she placed her famous “Job Wanted” ad in the Hollywood trade papers. That led to her comeback role as the demented former child star in Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? Some of her notable films are Death on the Nile (1978), The Nanny (1965), Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte (1964), The Virgin Queen (1955), The Man Who Came to Dinner 1942, The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex (1939), and The Petrified Forest (1936). In the 1950s and 1960s, she had roles in many of the major television series: “It Takes a Thief,” “Gunsmoke,” “Perry Mason,” “The Andy Williams Show,” “The Virginian,” “Wagon Train,”
“Alfred Hitchcock Presents,” “Ford Theater,” “General Electric Theater,” and even “What’s My Line.” Illness forced her to pull out of the 1982-’83 television series “Hotel”—her replacement was Anne Baxter. Who says movies don’t mimic real life?

Anne Baxter (b. May 7, 1923, Michigan City, Indiana—d. December 12, 1985, age 62, in New York, New York), was the granddaughter of Frank Lloyd Wright, and did a good deal of television miniseries work in the 1980s. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s she appeared in the major dramatic omnibus series, as well as such shows as “Banacek,” “Cannon,” “Marcus Welby, MD,” “The Big Valley,” “The Virginia,” “The F.B.I.,” and “Batman” (as ‘Olga, Queen of the Cossacks’ and ‘Zelda the Great’). She won a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for The Razor’s Edge (1946), and a best actress nomination for All About Eve. Some of her other films were A Walk on the Wild Side (1962), Cimarron (1960), The Ten Commandments (1956), The Sullivans (1944), The North Star (1943), and The Magnificent Ambersons (1942).

George Sanders (b. July 3, 1906, St. Petersburg, Russia [British parents]—d. April 25, 1972, age 65, Barcelona, Spain) was in more than 120 movies, several of them about two suave detectives, The Saint and The Falcon. Some of his films: The Quiller Memorandum (1966), The Amorous Adventures of Moll Flanders (1965), Solomon and Sheba (1959), Call Me Madam (1953), I Can Get It for You Wholesale (1951), Samson and Delilah (1949), Forever Amber (1947), The Picture of Dorian Gray (1945), A Date with the Falcon (1941), and (1940). In his later films and in many TV roles he played charming villains and heels. In 1937, he told David Niven that he intended to commit suicide when he got older. And so he did in 1973, swallowing three bottles of Nembutol and leaving this note: “Dear World, I am leaving because I am bored. I feel I have lived long enough. I am leaving you with your worries in this sweet cesspool. Good luck.”

Celeste Holm (b. April 29, 1919 in Brooklyn, New York—d. July 15, 2012, age 95, in Manhattan, New York City, New York) appeared in Broadway plays before coming to Hollywood, among them The Women, Oklahoma! and Bloomer Girl. She won a best supporting actress Oscar for her third film, Gentlemen’s Agreement (1947), and two best supporting nominations—for Come to the Stable (1949) and All About Eve (1950). In the ’70s and ’80s she appeared in many popular TV series, such as “Wonder Woman,” “Trapper John, M.D.,” “Falcon Crest,” “Matt Houston,” “Magnum, P.I.,” “Spenser: For Hire,” and “Cheers”; in 1994 she appeared in two episodes of “Touched by an Angel.” She several times interrupted her film career to work on Broadway. Some of her other films are High Society (1956), The Tender Trap (1955), Everybody Does It (1949), The Snake Pit (1948), and Gentleman’s Agreement (1947).

Gary Merrill (b. August 2, 1915, Hartford, Connecticut—d. March 5, 1990 (age 74) in Falmouth, Maine) was 35 and Bette Davis 42 when they starred All About Eve, close enough for her line about him in the film to ring true: “Bill's thirty-two. He looks thirty-two. He looked it five years ago, he'll look it twenty years from now. I hate men.” Playing a married couple must have felt good to both of them: after the film was done, they divorced their respective spouses and got married. Two of his better early films are Twelve O’clock High (1949) and Slattery’s Hurricane (1949), while Merrill is perhaps best known as a disembodied voice on scores of radio and television voice-over commercials.

Marilyn Monroe (b. Norma Jean Baker, 1 June 1926, Los Angeles—5 August 1962, Los Angeles, drug overdose) is the only actor of note in All About Eve who was never nominated for an Academy Award, quite an achievement considering her performances in The Misfits (1961), Some Like It Hot (1959), The Prince and the Showgirl (1957), Bus Stop (1956), The Seven Year Itch (1955), River of No Return (1954), Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953), Niagara (1953), How to Marry a Millionaire (1953), Clash by Night (1952), and The Asphalt Jungle (1950).

Thelma Ritter (b. February 14, 1905, Brooklyn—never lost her Brooklyn edge and it made her one of the great supporting actors (6 Oscar nominations). Some of her films are What’s So Bad About Feeling Good? (1968), The Incident (1967), Boeing Boeing (1965), How the West Was Won (1962), Birdman of Alcatraz (1962), The Misfits (1961), Pillow Talk (1959), Daddy Long Legs (1955), Rear Window (1954), Pickup on South Street (1953), Titanic (1953), The Mating Season (1951), and City Across the River (1949).
American director, scenarist, and producer, was born in Wiles-Barre, Pennsylvania, third and youngest child of Frank (or Franz) and Johanna (Blumenau) Mankiewicz. Both parents were German-Jewish immigrants who met and married in New York. Frank Mankiewicz, a “rip-snorting atheist” with a fervent belief in education, had moved to Wilkes-Barre to take a job as editor of a German-language newspaper, later becoming a language instructor at the local Hillman Academy. In 1913 the family returned to New York, where Frank Mankiewicz took up a post at Stuyvesant High School.

Since his father, as well as teaching high school and tutoring privately, was also studying nightly for his master’s degree, the young Joseph Mankiewicz was raised mostly by his mother, “a round little woman who was uneducated in four languages.” He grew up “an only child in the sense that my brother and sister were a generation older than I was, and I was a very tiny little fellow among screaming, articulate giants….We moved as many as six times a year, and I found new friends every three months….There were always new neighborhoods, new gangs of kids, new adjustments. I became skillful at taking the color of my environment without absorbing it.” Meanwhile Frank Mankiewicz completed a doctorate and went on to become a professor at City College and editor of the prestigious Modern Language Quarterly. A brilliant man but a demanding and authoritarian parent, he expected his children to distinguish themselves, preferably along the path he had chosen.

After graduating from Stuyvesant at the age of fifteen, Joseph Mankiewicz enrolled at Columbia to study psychiatry. He got no further than the pre-med course. Repelled at the prospect of dissecting worms and frogs, he flunked with the nethermost grade and switched to liberal arts. When he graduated in 1928, having majored in English, his father rewarded him with further study in Europe. The plan was for Joseph to enroll at the University of Berlin, proceed from there to the Sorbonne and Oxford, and then return to America to teach. “That was my father’s idea, but not mine,” Mankiewicz has recalled. “When I hit Berlin in 1928, I was dazzled by the theater.” Using contacts established by his brother Herman, he quit the academic life in favor of more exciting employment. Three employments in fact: as a junior reporter in the Berlin office of the Chicago Tribune, as the Berlin stringer for Variety, and—his first contact with the film world—translating intertitles from German to English for UFA silents. “I was earning about $100 a week and living like a king. I learned more about everything in those four months in Berlin than I think I’ve learned in the rest of my life.” Living in an “absolute intoxication of theater, excitement, glamour and sex,” Mankiewicz rapidly overspent his triple income and had to leave town when the checks started bouncing. After three miserably penurious months in Paris he was rescued by Herman, by now well-established as a writer at Paramount. Since part of Herman’s job was to lure talented writers to the studio, and nepotism was a Hollywood tradition, he saw no reason to ignore his younger brother. (A year later he also fixed his sister Erna up with a job, but she never took to screenwriting and soon resumed her teaching career.)

Mankiewicz started at Paramount on $60 a week, writing titles for sound movies that in some venues still had to be shown silent. His first assignment was The Dummy which Herman had scripted; other early movies included Sternberg’s Thunderbolt and Victor Fleming’s The Virginian. In his first eight weeks at the studio, he titled a record six movies; his fluency attracted the attention of David Selznick, who had him upgraded to a dialogue writer for a Jack Oakie vehicle, Fast Company (1929). The film did well and Mankiewicz went on to script another half-dozen pictures for the comedian. Best-remembered of them today are two that also featured W.C. Fields: Million Dollar Legs (1932), an anarchic comedy, and If I Had a Million (1932), an eight-episode movie that employed seven directors, eighteen writers, and most of the studio’s acting roster. The previous year Mankiewicz had gained his first Oscar nomination as screenwriter on Skippy (1931), a sentimental juvenile comedy based on a popular comic strip.

Mankiewicz’s last film for Paramount was a prestige production of Alice in Wonderland (1933), stuffed with stars and stupefyingly dull. David Selznick, who had returned to MGM, now offered him a contract, and signed him to co-script Manhattan Melodrama (1934). A routinely competent crime drama, it achieved fortuitous fame as the movie Dillinger had been watching just before he was gunned down, and earned Mankiewicz his second Academy Award nomination. In May of that year, he married Elizabeth Young, an actress, having overcome the opposition of her patrician New York family. Their son Eric was born in 1936.
For a nominal fee, Mankiewicz provided dialogue for King Vidor’s independently produced naïve agrarian parable, Our Daily Bread (1934), before turning out two frothy studio comedies for Joan Crawford. “It was at this time that dysentery was very prevalent… and whimsy spread through Hollywood in even greater proportions. I was badly taken with it.” Whimsy or not, this was evidently what the public wanted. Mankiewicz, having scripted three hits in a row and now earning $1,250. A week, approached Louis B. Mayer and asked to direct his own material.

Mayer turned him down; first, he must become a producer. “You have to learn to crawl before you can walk,” he told Mankiewicz, who considered this “about as good a definition of a producer as any.” So began his “black years” at MGM, during which “I produced a great many films which I am embarrassed to have associated with my name.” He had no cause, though, to feel ashamed of Fury (1936), Fritz Lang’s first American film, a harsh, dispassionate account of lynch-mob violence. He then marked time with a series of vehicles for Joan Crawford, with whom he was currently involved. His marriage to Elizabeth Young ended in divorce in 1937.

“If I go down at all in literary history, in a footnote, it will be as the swine who rewrote F. Scott Fitzgerald.” Three Comrades (1938), taken from a novel by Remarque, carried Fitzgerald’s only screenwriter credit, though his dialogue was extensively revised by Mankiewicz, The changes prompted Fitzgerald’s famous, pathetic plea. “Oh, Joe, can’t a producer ever be wrong? I’m a good writer—honest. “You should have seen… [Fitzgerald’s] screenplay,” Mankiewicz later observed in his own defense. “Some novelists cannot write dialogue and Scott Fitzgerald was one of them.”

In July 1939 Mankiewicz married for the second time. His new wife was Rosa Stradner, a prominent Austrian actress under contract to MGM. The couple had two sons, Christopher (born 1940) and Thomas (born 1942), both now working in Hollywood. The year after his marriage, Mankiewicz produced the comic masterpiece of his decade at MGM. (“I’m going to be fired,” he remarked in the studio refectory, “I’ve made a good picture.”) The Philadelphia Story (1940), impeccably cast, written and performed, was rapturously received, and still ranks as a classic of elegant, sophisticated comedy.

In 1941, soon after Herman Mankiewicz’s Academy Award for his Citizen Kane screenplay, Frank Mankiewicz died of a cerebral hemorrhage. The fact that their father had lived to see Herman triumph, while he himself was still stuck in the inglorious role of a Metro producer, intensified Mankiewicz’s dissatisfaction. His remaining films at Metro were unremarkable, apart from Woman of the Year (1942), the witty and stylish comedy in which Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy were first teamed.

Mankiewicz finally quit MGM in 1943, after a furious row with Louis B. Mayer. (The immediate cause was Mankiewicz’s affair with Judy Garland, in whom Mayer alleged a paternal interest.) He moved to 20th Century-Fox, where, after a final job as a producer—Keys of the Kingdom (1944), a stolidly worthy religious piece—he was at long last permitted to direct.

Despite his fifteen-year apprenticeship, there was little that was distinctively personal—or particularly distinguished —about Mankiewicz’s first five films as director. Dragonwyck (1946) offered sub-Brontean Gothickry, with Vincent Price waving his eyebrows as a despotic landowner planning to bump off his beautiful wife (Gene Tierney). The producer was Ernst Lubitsch, whom Mankiewicz revered, but the two men quarreled disastrously, and Lubitsch took his name off the film.

Though negligible in itself, Dragonwyck does mark an early appearance of a theme that recurs in many Mankiewicz films, through All About Eve and Five Fingers right up to The Honey Pot and Sleuth. Steve Fagan, writing in Film Reader (1975), defined it as “the clash between patricians and parvenus”, the challenge to a socially or culturally well-established figure by a younger, brasher outsider, who often succeeds in supplanting the other by sheer force of ambition.

Mankiewicz wrote his own script for Dragonwyck (from a novel by Anya Seton), and co-scripted his second film, Somewhere in the Night (1946), a noir-ish thriller with a tortuous plot and an amnesiac hero. For his next three pictures he elected to leave the scripting to someone else while he “concentrated upon learning the technique and craft of directing—indeed, upon dissociating myself as far as possible from the writer’s approach.”

His choice as screenwriter was Philip Dunne, whose urbane, literate style mashed perfectly with
Mankiewicz’s. The Late George Apley (1947), from a novel by John P. Marquand, was described by a *Time* critic “a friendly, quietly amusing, rather slow picture.” Most of the novel’s social satire was lost in Dunne’s adaptation, which substituted a conventional happy ending for the ironic posthumous epilogue (thus making nonsense of the title) and allowed Ronald Coleman to deploy his habitual gentlemanly charm as the eponymous Boston patriarch.

If *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947) was livelier, it was thanks largely to Rex Harrison, in the first of his four Mankiewicz films. As the ghost of a raffish sea captain, complete with nautical beard and vocabulary (skillfully bowdlerized by Dunne to suit the prevailing censorship), his stylish brio prevented the fantasy from sliding into whimsy—at least while he was on the screen. “A thing of lightness and grey charm,” thought Gordon Gow, “[characterized by] an astringent romanticism.” The movie later served as the basis for a successful television series.

Though none of Mankiewicz’s films had so far been an outstanding hit, all had shown respectable box-office returns. *Escape* (1948) was his first flop. Filmed in Britain under a tax settlement agreement, it was adapted by Dunne from a 1926 Galsworthy play, and again starred Rex Harrison (who had suggested the subject to Zanuck) as a convict escaped from Dartmoor. Much of the filming was done on location, but the picture bogged down less in the terrain than in Galsworthy’s trite moralizing. Some critics, though, among them Pauline Kael, have considered the film unfairly neglected.

Back in Hollywood, Mankiewicz set about making a film that at last bore his own personal stamp. “Sol Siegel showed me an adaptation …of a novel called *A Letter to Five Wives* (1949) by John Klempern. I read it and knew I had looked upon the Promised Land.” *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949)—Mankiewicz dropped one wife and Zanuck, “in an almost bloodless operation,” persuaded him to excise another—scored a hit with both public and critics, and won Mankiewicz two Oscars for writing and for directing. The film displays all his characteristic virtues (or virtuositites): an intricate plot-line, woven around deftly-handled multiple flashbacks, crisp, intelligent dialogue, mordant social satire, incisively depicted characters, deployed in taut, dramatic situations.

All the qualities, in short—as Mankiewicz himself would readily concede—of the best stage comedy. David Thompson noted that Mankiewicz “creates the atmosphere of the proscenium arch, a little Shavian in the way he arranges action for an audience.”

*A Letter* also marks the first appearance of another Mankiewicz feature, the ironic, omniscient commentator—although in this case, “appear” is just what she never does. Addie Ross, local siren and writer of *The Letter*, remains a silky off-screen voice (that of Celeste Holm), felinely taunting the three friends whose lives she has disrupted. She has, she informs them, made off with the husband of one of them. Cut off from their homes on a May Day picnic, they must agonize until evening over which man she has taken. Since all three marriages are, in different ways, under strain, each wife can indulge in a long anguished flashback before the final revelation. This denouement, in fact, falls rather flat, but what precedes it more than compensates—especially Thelma Ritter, detectibly caustic in her first major screen role, and Paul Douglas as a rich businessman inflamed into matrimony by the canny withheld allurements if Linda Darnell.

Mankiewicz also scripted most of *House of Strangers* (1949), though a dispute with his co-writer, Philip Yordan, led to Yordan taking sole writer credit. The picture did poorly in America, “because it was a bad film,” Mankiewicz remarked sourly, though he later revised his opinion. It was much better received in Europe, where Edward G. Robinson won best actor award at Cannes for his portrayal of the immigrant Italian barber-turned-banker who denigrates his family and the film. *House of Strangers* also attracted the attention of the young French critics, and founded Mankiewicz’s high reputation among the *nouvelle vague*. Jean-Luc Godard, writing in the *Gazette de Cinéma*, hailed him as “one of the most brilliant of American directors,” and added that *House* incorporated “one of the finest flashbacks in the history of the cinema.” More recently, Andrew Sarris has called it “a movie that becomes more memorable with each passing year.”

Zanuck, whose carefully packaged dramas of racial prejudice such as *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947) and *Pinky* (1949) had proved good box-office, now offered Mankiewicz another in the same tradition. *No Way Out* (1950) pitted a young black intern (Sidney Poitier in his screen debut) against a psychotic racist (Richard Widmark) whose brother’s death the intern was unable to prevent. Though often vivid and dramatic, the film stacked its cards too bluntly for conviction; deplored the persecution of saintly black medics by white psychopaths scarcely constituted a bold attack on racism.
It is often asserted that Mankiewicz’s films are essentially theatrical. François Truffaut, with no implication of disparagement, has classified him as a master of théâtre filmé. One reason for this is surely his lifelong fascination with the theater’s “creative commune….the quirks and frailties, the needs and talents of the performing personality.” This fascination, deeply sentimental behind a cynical facade, informs the quintessential Mankiewicz movie, All About Eve (1950). Widely regarded as his masterpiece, it traces the irresistible rise to stardom of a sweet-faced young predator, Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter). The film is structured around Mankiewicz’s favorite format, the extended multiple flashback: from the ceremony at which Eve is to receive the coveted Sarah Siddons Award, we backtrack through the voice-over memories of three characters scarred in her climb, finally returning full circle to the presentation.

“I don’t think,” Mankiewicz had often responded to charges of excessive verbiage, “that there can ever be an excess of good talk.” Not all talk, in his films, unfortunately, is good, but in Eve it rarely fails to be less than brilliant. His script, as Neil Sinyard has commented, “seems not so much written as detonated,” sparkling with epigrams, wisecracks, and five-star bitchiness. (Celeste Holm, one of the film’s leads, felt that “Joe was in love with the concept of the theatre as a wolverine’s lair of skullduggery and bitchcraft.) Many of the best lines go, as usual, to the resident Mankiewicz-surrogate, in this case the coolly venomous dramatic critic Addison DeWitt—George Sanders, delicately placing the witticisms like poisoned banderillas, gave the performance of his life and reaped a well-deserved Oscar. Nevertheless, wrote Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, “what really interests Mankiewicz in All Abut Eve as well as most of his other films are the women, and through them the permanence of a certain kind of femininity, the archetype of a certain way of being female.”

Two more Oscars went to Mankiewicz, again for scripting and directing, making him the only person so far to win two Academy Awards two years running. Eve was also chosen as Best Picture and gained a record number of nominations (fourteen), plus awards in New York, Cannes, London and elsewhere. Reviewers, with few exceptions, frothed with enthusiasm. Those who complained of a lack of realism, Hollis Alpert pointed out in the Saturday Review, were rather missing the point. “[Mankiewicz] obviously knows how to get the most out of his players, but more than this is his ability to stylize a picture. The documentary approach is not for him; rather he likes to get as fictional a quality as possible, so that…the audience remains entirely in the realm of illusion.” Over the years Eve has sustained its reputation as a high point of sophisticated comedy with “the highest quotient of (verbal) wit of any film made before or since.” (David Shipman).

In 1950, soon after winning his first pair of Oscars, Mankiewicz had been elected president of the Screen Directors Guild. He was nominated for the post by Cecil B. DeMille, who at that time had the Guild in his pocket. However, the virulently right-wing DeMille, perhaps having overheard Mankiewicz’s opinion of his films (*DeMille has his finger up the pulse of America*), decided that his erstwhile protegé was a dangerous lefty and initiated maneuvers to have Mankewicz ousted from the presidency. There followed several weeks of conspiratorial shenanigans, loyalty oaths, ballots and petitions, culminating in what Mankiewicz termed “the most dramatic evening of my life”—a seven-hour emergency meeting of the Guild, at which he and his supporters, who included John Huston, William Wyler, and George Stevens, decisively defeated DeMille and forced his resignation from the committee. Nonetheless Mankiewicz, a middle-of-the-road liberal and “the least politically minded person in the world,” felt revolted by the whole affair. Shortly afterwards he announced his intention of “getting the hell out of Hollywood” and moving east.

Something of his Guild experience was reflected in People Will Talk (1951), adapted from Curt Goetz’s 1933 German film Dr. Praetorius, in which an unconventional medical professor (played by Cary Grant) suffers an assault on his professional and private life by malicious colleagues. Both plot and hero were rankly implausible. Mankiewicz, wrote the Time critics “tests Bernard Shaw’s theory that people will listen to anything as long as it is amusingly said.” Either the theory was wrong or the talk was insufficiently amusing, for the film did poorly at the box office, though it remains one of its director’s personal favorites.

For his last film at Fox, Mankiewicz turned for the only time in his career to factual material—albeit substantially transformed. Five Fingers (1952) was
adapted from L.C. Moyzisch’s book *Operation Cicero*, which told how the British Ambassador’s valet in Ankara sold military secrets to the Germans during World War II. “If Hitchcock had ever collaborated with Lubitsch,” Neil Sinyard wrote, “the result might have resembled *Five Fingers*.” As Diello, valet turned master-spy, James Mason gave one of his finest performances, subtly conveying the cold ambition beneath a surface of urbane deference. He was well-matched by Danielle Darrieux, as an exiled Polish countess short of money and scruples. For contractual reasons Michael Wilson, author of the original adaptation, took sole screenwriting credit, but the dialogue, and the sardonic slant on patriotism and loyalty, betray Mankiewicz’s touch, Gordon Gow observed that “the oblique comment upon the absurdities which are promoted by conflicting nations braced the romanticism with a cynical wit,” and Richard Corliss praised the film as “a graceful blending of political intrigue and sexual politics, with as mordant a tone as any of the black comedies it prefigured.”

Quitting Fox on reasonably amicable terms, Mankiewicz and his family exchanged the “intellectual fog belt” of Los Angeles for midtown Manhattan. His plan was “to make my pitch for the theatre”, but an offer from MGM whence he had departed under a cloud ten years earlier, proved too much to resist. The project was , in any case calculated to appeal to him: a film version of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (1953), to be produced by John Housman, who had staged the famous Mercury Theatre version with Orson Welles in 1937.

Critical opinion, then and since, has divided over the Mankiewicz-Housman *Caesar*. Lindsay Anderson approvingly quoted Housman’s description of the play as “a political thriller,” adding: “[Mankiewicz] has appreciated the sensational excellence of the writing and has filmed it directly, powerfully and dramatically. There are no visual tricks to distract one from the marvelous words….If the later scenes in the film lack the brilliance and tension of the first half, the fault is largely Shakespeare’s.” Bernard Dick, though, found the film “only occasionally cinematic….Everything seemed cabined and confined, except the assassination and the funeral oration, there were few surprises….Much of *Julius Caesar* looks like the aftermath of a budget cut.” Dick singled out, as have other critics, the glaringly artificial mound on which Cassius kills himself, and the bizarre decision to stage the battle of Philippi in a canyon “like an ambush in a B Western.”

The lead performances, too, have been widely debated (with the exception of Louis Calhoun’s Caesar, generally agreed to be inadequate). James Mason’s thoughtful, sensitive Brutus was found colorless by some, while Gielgud’s vibrant portrait of embittered malice as Cassius struck others as over-theatrical. Most controversial was the casting of Marlon Brando as a “thrillingly histrionic Antony, contemptuously inspecting his hand after having it shaken in friendship by the murderers, and displaying Caesar’s body to the crowd as a bloodcurdlingly effective prop” (Neil Sinyard). Jack L. Jorgens, commending Mankiewicz and Housman’s “refusal to sentimentalize, popularize or oversimplify ,” regretted that the film contained “memorable dramatic moments, but no memorable images. In seeking restraint and a distancing effect, Mankiewicz often succeeded only in making scenes bland and visually dull.” He concluded, though, that “few Shakespeare films can match it for its integrity in dealing with the original, its narrative drive, and its fine characterizations.

MGM announced a further Shakespeare project for Mankiewicz: a version of *Twelfth Night*, with Audrey Hepburn playing both Viola and Sebastian. The idea fell through, and he returned to New York to direct a new production of *La Boheme* at the Met, in which he tried to rid the opera of some of the sentimental detritus that had accrued to it over the years. Reviews were lukewarm, and Mankiewicz, disappointed, reverted to movie making, setting up a deal between United Artists and his own newly-formed independent company, Figaro, Inc.

Shortly before the premiere of *Julius Caesar*, Herman Mankiewicz had died at the age of fifty-five. The mingled admiration and envy that Joe had felt toward his brother, and the guilty triumph at seeing his own fortunes prosper while Herman’s faded, perhaps contributed to the “slough of ill-humor in which he made his next movie. Mankiewicz’s first film in color—and the first that he wrote, directed, and produced—*The Barefoot Contessa* (1954), was summed up by Pauline Kael as “a trash masterpiece.” Like a soured, overripe counterpart in *All About Eve*, the film traces in flashback a woman’s rise to fame. Maria Vargas (Ava Gardner) is discovered in a Madrid nightclub by a Hughes-ish movie tycoon, shoots to stardom, joins the international set, and is eventually murdered by the jealous Italian count she has married. Her story is narrated by three mourners at her funeral: the Count (Rossano Brazzi), a publicist, Oscar Muldoon (a sweating sycophantic *tour de force* that won Edmund...
O’Brien an Academy Award), and the inevitable Mankiewicz figure, writer-director Harry Dawes (Humphrey Bogart).

“Joseph Mankiewicz, one begins to think,” observed Penelope Houston, “looks on a film as a sort of expanding suitcase...and in The Barefoot Contessa the suitcase has split wide open under the strain...He has buried this fundamentally novelettish story in an immense cocoon of verbiage.” Most English language reviewers concurred, and Henry Hart accused Mankiewicz of “an ambivalent hatred and envy for the aristocracy; an ambivalent distaste for and trucking to the proletariat.” In France, though, Contessa was hailed as its director’s masterpiece. “This is not a film to be picked apart,” wrote François Truffaut, “either one rejects it or accepts it whole. I myself accept and value it for its freshness, intelligence and beauty.” Similar laudatory comments were made by Godard (who called Mankiewicz “the most intelligent man in all contemporary cinema”) and other French critics. Fellini later claimed Contessa as his direct inspiration for La Dolce Vita.

Sam Goldwyn, who had acquired the rights to Frank Loesser’s smash hit Guys and Dolls against fierce competition, offered Mankiewicz the chance of directing and scripting the movie version. Mankiewicz jumped at the idea and made very respectable job of it: if not one of the great screen musicals, Guys and Dolls (1955) is consistently lively, likeable, and passably Runyonesque. Surprisingly, the pair of “non-singers,” Marlon Brando and Jean Simmons. Came off better than Frank Sinatra and Vivian Blaine, the professional vocalists. Michael Kidd choreographed exhilaratingly, most notably in the fight sequence when a drunken Jean Simmons takes on all comers in a Cuban bar. Brando and Sinatra, by all accounts, detested each other, but none of their hostility comes across in the picture which, as Goldwyn aptly put it, “has warmth and charmth.”

Even Mankiewicz’s warmest admirers have reservations about The Quiet American (1958). “Such delicacy in the scenario, so many gems in the dialogue, are staggering, Jean-Luc Godard wrote. “But is this not a reproach rather than praise? It all looks, in fact, as though everything had been planned on paper, the actual shooting adding very little...He is too perfect a writer to be a director as well.” Graham Greene’s novel, on which Mankiewicz based his script, warned with remarkable prescience of the perils of American naivity in what was then French Indochina. Mankiewicz, however, jettisoned Greene’s subtle ambiguities in favor of a crassly pro-American ending. The American turns out to have been not just naive but innocent of any harm. Fowler, the English journalist who brings about his death, was duped by the devious Communists. The resultant fable, far too black and white to be Greene, found little favor with critics or audiences, though Michael Redgrave’s “acidly intelligent playing” (Penelope Houston) as Fowler was widely praised, as was Robert Krasker’s atmospheric cinematography.

In September 1958, Rosa Mankiewicz committed suicide in a summer home the family had rented in upstate New York. She had often threatened, and attempted suicide, this time she had carried through.
Suddenly Last Summer (1959) had made up half of a Tennessee Williams double bill off-Broadway. Sam Spiegel bought the movie rights and invited Mankiewicz to direct. Williams, together with Gore Vidal, took screenplay credit but later repudiated the film, complaining that “a short morality play, in a lyrical style, was turned into a sensationaly successful film that the public thinks was a literal study of such things as cannibalism, madness and sexual deviation.” It seems highly improbable that the public thought anything of the sort, the film is so evidently and unashamedly a roaring Grand Guignol melodrama, played several inches past the hilt. A rich recluse, (Katherine Hepburn in her nuttiest grande dame vein) tries to pressure a young psychosurgeon (Montgomery Clift) into lobotomizing her niece (Elizabeth Taylor) into permanent amnesia. The doctor finds out what is supposed to be forgotten: the niece was being used by her cousin, a pederastic poet, to entice young Spanish urchins, some of whom had eventually torn him apart and eaten him. “The violent poetry of the writing is given eloquent expression in every aspect of the film’s visual design,” wrote Neil Sinyard, “and the performances are extraordinary.” Both Hepburn and Taylor were nominated for Oscars, and Suddenly gave Mankiewicz his biggest box-office since All About Eve.

His reputation restored, Mankiewicz signed a contract to write and direct for his old studio, Fox. A planned adaptation of Stephen Vincent Benét’s epic Civil War poem, John Brown’s Body, came to nothing, but Fox then offered him a project greatly to his taste. Lawrence Durrell’s kaleidoscopic series of novels, The Alexandria Quartet. Durrell’s multiple-viewpoint structure and highly-colored prose offered Mankiewicz scope for just the kind of filmmaking he liked, full of witty prolixity and complex patterns of flashbacks.

Mankiewicz later described his failure to direct this film as “the greatest disappointment of my career….If ever I were to summon up enough talent to make a definitive film about anything, this would have been it.” He had completed around his first half of his first draft of Justine (some 674 pages) to Durrell’s whole-hearted approval when he received an emergency call from Spyros Skouras, head of Fox. The studio was in deep trouble with its ambitious epic production Cleopatra. Would Mankiewicz take over and rescue them? Despite severe misgivings, he let himself be persuaded. “It was on my part, knowingly an act of whoredom—I was handsomely paid. And, in the end, in turn, I paid. Most unhandsomely indeed.” (Justine eventually reached the screen in 1969, in a dismally inadequate version. Durrell, who had always dreaded a sort of Peyton Place with camels,” saw his worst fears realized.

The Fox executives had reason to be desperate about Cleopatra. It had now been two years in the making. The $6 million budget had already been overspent by $1 million, and Reuben Mamoulian, the director, had just ten and a half minutes of film in the can. Elizabeth Taylor, playing the title role for a record $1 million fee, was thoroughly unhappy with Mamoulian and asked for Mankiewicz. Skouras, a nervously impulsive man given to panicky snap decisions, readily agreed to Mankiewicz’s exorbitant terms: one and a half million dollars to buy the director’s half interest in Figaro, the same again to buy out NBC, who owned the other fifty percent; plus, of course a generous salary and expenses.

Mankiewicz hoped to finish Cleopatra in fifteen weeks. In fact it took him eighteen months. “The toughest three pictures I ever made,” he ruefully remarked. “Cleopatra was first conceived in emergency, shot in hysteria, and wound up in blind panic.” As error piled on disaster, costs spiraled to $35 million (still, allowing for inflation, the most expensive picture ever made), and the production became a public joke., compounded by press obsession with the increasingly overt affair between Taylor and Richard Burton (playing Antony). Walter Wanger, the original producer, was sacked. Three weeks late Skouras was ousted from the presidency of Fox, and Daryl F. Zanuck took over. One of his first acts was to fire Mankiewicz from the picture. Though later rehired, Mankiewicz had no hand in the final cut.

Predictably, Cleopatra (1963) was damned on release. No one but Andy Warhol seemed to like it, and he liked it because it was “long and boring.” Of the principal actors, only Rex Harrison as Caesar came off with honor (and an Oscar nomination). Burton was found dull, and Taylor hopelessly underequipped for her role, utterly lacking in “infinite variety.” Dilys Powell was more restrained than most in her judgment: “Mr. Mankiewicz has made a film about the barge she sat in. The trouble is that there is nobody or next to nobody sitting in it. The barge itself, I must admit, really is something….There is a kind of vulgarity which by its own boldness becomes beautiful, and his is it.” But most critics treated the picture as the definitive Hollywood Edsel. Although commentary has become more temperate in recent years, the verdict on
Cleopatra has not been reversed.

This debacle permanently damaged Mankiewicz’s reputation but clinched his third marriage. Rosemary Matthews, an Englishwoman, had met Mankiewicz in Rome during the filming of The Barefoot Contessa, and acted as his personal assistant on Cleopatra. They were married in December 1962 and their daughter Alexandra Kate was born in 1966.

In 1964 Mankiewicz directed a film for ABC-TV, A Carol for Another Christmas. An update of Dickens in the form of a political satire, it amply confirmed Mankiewicz’s claim that he was not “politically minded.” His next feature film also modernized a literary classic, Ben Jonson’s Volpone, throwing in a murder mystery for good measure. The Honey Pot (1967) is set in contemporary Venice where Cecil Fix (Rex Harrison), a man of reputedly immense wealth summon three women from his past to what they believe to be his deathbed. Even for Mankiewicz, this was an exceptionally verbose film, further marred by a general uncertainty of tone. It had its admirers, nevertheless, and Stephen Farber wrote that the two scenes between Harrison and Maggie Smith “are as masterful examples of high comic writing as we can hope to see in movies.”

Will, a Shakespeare biopic to be scripted by Anthony Burgess, proved abortive, as did a proposed version of John Updike’s Couples. In stead, Mankiewicz unexpectedly directed his first Western. There Was a Crooked Man (1970), written by Robert Benton and David Newman (Oscar winners for their script of Bonnie and Clyde), combined two genres in one: western and prison movie. A richly cynical comedy, it was structured around the dealings between a charmingly ruthless convict (Kirk Douglas with granny glasses and unfazable grin) and the conscientious prison warden (Henry Fonda, in a parody of his own solemnly liberal image) who tries to reform him.

In support the film assembled a “parade of beautifully defined, rounded characterizations of amiable rogues,” as Tom Milne put it, adding that Crooked Man “comes closer to the true spirit of Ben Jonson than The Honey Pot….One shouldn’t be too hard on a film which revels so persistently in dry, civilized ironies.” Many critics, though, found the moral ambiguity self-defeating. Paul Zimmerman called it “a piecework movie in which individual sequences work well but contradict each other and total moral confusion reigns.”

Mankiewicz’s last film to date was Sleuth (1972), scripted by Anthony Shaffer from his own stage hit. The convoluted plot entailed an elaborate and ultimately murderous passage of game-playing between two men, an elderly thriller-writer and the successful hairdresser who has seduced the writer’s wife. The cast of two, Lawrence Olivier and Michael Caine, provided virtuoso playing, but the artificiality that had seemed audacious on the stage looked merely hollow on screen, David Thomson described the film as “a grotesque throwback to theatricality, indicative of Mankiewicz’s readiness to be fooled by cleverness and of his lack of creative personality.” Sleuth, nonetheless, proved his first box-office success for over a decade and earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Director. Criticisms of Joseph Mankiewicz have centered, inevitably, on the allegedly uncinematic priority of words over images in his work. Comparing The Barefoot Contessa to Pandora and the Flying Dutchman, Andrew Sarris commented, “Mankiewicz’s sensibility is decidedly more refined than Lewin’s, but his technique is almost as pedestrian.”

“Pungent situations, witty dialogue and smart playing,” wrote David Thomson, “conceal his indifference to what a film looks like or his inability to reveal the emotional depths beneath dialogue.” For himself, Mankiewicz has always maintained that “I don’t believe the word is of prime importance. I believe that the word is worthy of equal respect,” and that film is “a medium for the exchange of ideas and exchange of comment as well as purely visual effects.” It seems unlikely that Mankiewicz will ever regain the status that he achieved at he zenith of his fame in the early 1950s. His stock remains high in France, though, where he has often been honored by festivals and retrospectives. In 1983, he was the subject of a full-length film, All about Mankiewicz, made by Luc Béraud and Michel Ciment. At his finest, he was an acknowledged master of “quintessential Hollywood movies, with all the glamour and brittle sophistication of the best American high comedy” (Richard Corliss), and some of his detractors have subsequently had second thoughts. Andrew Sarris, who had dismissed Mankiewicz’s work as “a cinema of intelligence without inspiration,” later detected “a pattern of intelligence, charm and subtlety that I had tended to take too much for granted. What makes him truly admirable …is his defiance of a historical process that in its viciously simple-minded way is striving to make intelligent liberalism obsolete in a world sinking into the chaos of aimless absurdism. (Show, March 1970). Mankiewicz’s own view of current cinematic trends is similarly damning. Modern
Hollywood films he describes as “cartoons with balloon dialogue, for fourteen-year-old minds.” As for the industry itself, the Mayers, the Thalbergs, the Schencks, the Goldwyns, the Cohns…they were the Medici compared to the money-grabbers we have today. They were picture-makers, not deal-makers. The flesh peddlers, the agents are now in charge. And never before has the industry been such a con-game. The imps have taken over the whoreson.” Formerly known for his gregariousness, Mankiewicz is said to have become increasingly embittered and reclusive in recent years. He lives mainly on his estate in Bedford, New York, with his wife and daughter. Ostensibly he remains willing to direct more films but “the oldest whore on the beat” as he likes to call himself, has for the last ten years fastidiously turned down all propositions.


Mankiewicz began writing All About Eve (or Best Performance, as it was then called) in the early fall of 1949, in the peace and quiet of a ranch near Santa Barbara. The treatment took three months to complete; the first rough draft of the screenplay, six weeks. The shooting script was delivered in mid-March.…

Anyone who has the opportunity to compare the original story with the subsequent treatment and screenplay will realize the extent to which Mankiewicz rewrote and re-characterized those characters who have counterparts in Miss Orr’s story. Addison DeWitt, Bill Sampson, Birdie Coonan, Max Fabian, Miss Caswell, and Phobe are entirely of Mankiewicz’s creation.

But the greatest change from the original was wrought upon the character of the famous actress. In the story Margola Cranston is happily married and as Miss Orr has someone say of her: “If she ever sees 45 again, I’ll have my eyes lifted.” Well past forty and happily married were exactly what Mankiewicz did not feel were characteristic of the actress he wanted to portray; actually what he wanted to dramatize was:

“The trauma and terror with which so many of them approach both age forty and the transition from married actress to just married woman. The transition of their main performing arena from stage to home. And the rapid narrowing of roles available, down to the ultimate two: wife and/or woman.

“Let me digress a moment to get a definition straight. I’m talking about actresses (and actors too, of course, except they’re men and infinitely luckier and less complicated and less intriguing—to me, at any rate)—women who, since almost their earliest awareness of themselves, have been compelled to act in order to be. I am not talking about that vast remaining spectrum of those who appear on stage or screen (some successfully, at times, for a time) with all the emotional involvement of trained seals playing coronet solos. To wit: the big-titted sex symbols, the city-type cowboys, the country-type shitkickers, the once-and-future stuntmen, the TV transplants, the New England tawny types, the Bennington dropouts who invariably make the cover of Life—you can supply the names as well as I. No, Margo, the actress, was—and is—none of these. She was—and is—a woman whose need to act equates with her need to breathe. Who, when she isn’t ‘on’—just isn’t at all.

“Forty years of age, Four O. Give or take a year, the single most critical chronological milestone in the life of an actress. Look, I knew these women. I’d been in love with some—I’d worked with many of them. In the 30s I’d watch them roll into Paramount at six thirty in the morning on their way to hairdressing and makeup. Drive in usually with the top down, their hair all blown by the wind, no lipstick, their own eyelashes, wearing anything from a poncho to a polo coat—and I’d think Percy Westmore should be arrested for so much as touching a powder puff to their loveliness. Well, by the late thirties they were driving with the top up. Then, in the forties, they started wearing scarfs-and, by 1950, large hats. The pancake was getting thicker, the makeup took longer, the cameramen started using specially built little banks of ‘inkies’ to iron out wee bags and sags.

“Fortyish. You know, there’s an old cue that never fails to stimulate some bitchy theatrical wisecracks—just drop the name of the current fortyish actress who is having to decide the for first time whether to play the mother of a late teenager. The jokes may be funny, but don’t laugh. It’s a bitterly sad point of no return for an actress. It usually means that a wide range of stimulating and gratifying identity proxies—particularly those that reflect and sustain the metaphor of youth—would, from now on, be inexorably unavailable to her. That the personality-aliases left for her to assume would not become inevitably character roles and—if she was unlucky enough to have to go on—caricatures. Four O. Fortyish. For the actress, a kind of professional menopause, really.

“Well, so we’d grown up together, my generation of them; they were pushing forty—and so was I. But I was a writer and director, just beginning to formulate what I wanted to write and what I wanted my films to be about. And, lucky me, even if I’d been an actor, a male. There
was—and is—the theatrical rub. Women’s Lib has quite a point to make here: about a society which can evolve and foster a set of standards by which, at roughly age forty, the female actress is required to forswear the public projection of romantic and/or sexual allure—while the male actor carries on blithely.

“Gary Cooper was ‘getting the girl’ (a felicitous phrase, equating the male with a vice-presidency, a touchdown, or maybe the clap) after he was sixty; Gable was sixty, or close to it, when Marilyn Monroe (in The Misfits) wanted into his bed. Wayne, Fonda, and Cary Grany are well into their sixties; Kirk Douglas, Mitchum, Lancaster are among those in the middle fifties—hell, even Paul Newman and Brando are on the other side of forty-five. It’d make a fascinating sociological study: why our American morality considers it indulgently ‘G’ for Cary Grant to make love to, say, ali McGraw (in her twenties) and would react with ‘X’ outrage at Ryan O’Neal (in his twenties) bedding down with, say Ava Gardner (in her late forties). Me, if I were O’Neal, I’d choose Gardner any time.

“But that’s how the career crumbles with the female of the theatre-folk. And that was one of the facets of the actress I wanted to explore. With Margo, I complicated and compounded the problem by having her—at age forty—in love with Bill. I couldn’t have given her a more threatening love object. For one thing, as director, he worked in the same profession which had provided her with a lifelong sustenance—from which she was about to undergo the involuntary weaning I’ve described. Bill could, and would, go on forever in that profession; her share of its sustenance, however would depend upon whatever he happened to bring home with him at night. Would that—that shared ration—be enough? She’d had her own, all of it, for so long. She’d been, don’t forget, the only angel on the head of the pin. Would she grow to resent being, as it were, on some sort of ego-sharing welfare program?

“Another curve I threw the poor woman was to make Bill eight years younger than she. I’ve told you about how theatre-folk have their own arithmetic. Not a new but a very old math, indeed. Maargo describes it in the screenplay: ‘Bill’s thirty-two. He looks thirty-two. He looked it five years ago, he’ll look it twenty years from now. I hate men.’ And later, to Karen: ‘Those (eight) years stretch as the years go on.’

“Most importantly, I guess, I wanted Margo to dramatize, even if briefly, my concept of the actor and his/her early flight into the ‘identity proxy’ for ‘personality-substitute’ or ‘ego-alien’ or whatever the hell else I’ve dubbed it. His/her subsequent measure of success in coping with society behind the mask of that ‘proxy-substitute-alien.’ And then, inevitably with the actress, the traumatic reemergence of that inner Self she had decided so long ago was inadequate to attain even acceptance. An inner Self from which she had hidden behind those magical protane masks, or—as in the most tragic of instances—a Self she had never really known at all.

“When you’re Judy Garland, say, and at age three you’re shoved onto a stage into a spotlight to sing ‘Jingle Bells.’ And from that moment on, you’re told and told and told by everyone—audiences that cheer you in that spotlight when you sing, to a draconian mother who drills the unshakable conviction into you (You’ll carry it with you until you die)—that only in that spotlight, singing as loud as you can (didn’t Mummy have you billed as ‘The Little Girl with the Leather Lungs’?), are you ever acceptable to society, much less attractive in any way—how the hell can you possibly, for the rest of your life, know who you really are?