Sidney Lumet, FAIL-SAFE (1964, 112 min)

Directed by Sidney Lumet
Screenplay by Walter Bernstein
Based on the novel by Eugene Burdick & Harvey Wheeler
Produced by Max E. Youngstein
Cinematography by Gerald Hirschfeld
Edited by Ralph Rosenblum
Art Direction by Albert Brenner
Set Decoration by J.C. DeLaney

Dan O’Herlihy…General Black
Walter Matthau…Groeteschele
Frank Overton…General Bogan
Edward Binns…Colonel Grady
Fritz Weaver…Colonel Cascio
Henry Fonda…The President
Larry Hagman…Buck
William Hansen…Secretary Swenson
Russell Hardie…General Stark
Russell Collins…Knapp
Sorrell Booke…Congressman Raskob
Nancy Berg…Ilse Wolfe
John Connell…Thomas
Frank Simpson…Sullivan
Hildy Parks…Betty Black
Janet Ward…Mrs. Grady
Dom DeLuise…Sgt. Collins
Dana Elcar…Foster
Stewart Germain…Mr. Cascio
Louise Larabee…Mrs. Cascio
Frieda Altman…Jennie


Gerald Hirschfeld (April 25, 1921, New York City, New York) has 44 cinematographer credits, among them 1994 “Secret Sins of the...


American director and producer, born in Philadelphia, one of the two children of Polish-born parents, Baruch Lumet and the former Eugenia Wermus. Both parents were actors who had begun their career in Poland, gone to England, and then emigrated to the United States. In 1926 Baruch Lumet joined Maurice Schwartz’s Company at the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York City, subsequently appearing at other theatres on and off Broadway, until in 1939 he devised his own one-man show, “Monotheatre Varieties.” For seven years he toured with this throughout North America, and he has also appeared on television and in films, including several of his son’s. Baruch Lumet was director of the Dallas Institute of Performing Arts in 1953-1960, and in 1975 wrote and starred in a play called Autumn Fever.

The family moved from Philadelphia to New York when Baruch Lumet joined the Yiddish Art Theatre, and Sidney Lumet grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and in Brooklyn. He had his own acting debut at the Yiddish Art Theatre at the age of five, and other roles followed there and in radio shows. For two years during the Depression (1931-1932) he appeared in a Yiddish radio serial called The Rabbi From Brownsville. “My father wrote and directed the show and acted the leading man and the grandfather,” Lumet says. “My mother was the leading lady, and I played the son. All together, our weekly salary came to $35.”

Sidney Lumet first appeared on Broadway at the age of eleven, in Dead End (1935), by Sidney Kingsley, a family friend. He was too young and too small to play one of the Dead End Kids, and Kingsley wrote a part especially for him. Dead End was a notable example of 1930s theatrical realism—a style which, as Lumet acknowledges, permanently influenced his own work as a director.

A year or so later, Lumet had his first important role as the young Jesus Christ in Max Reinhardt’s production of The Eternal Road (1937). His performance attracted attention and a string of Broadway parts, including one in a play called One Third of a Nation (1939), an indictment of slum landlords that was filmed the same
year. Lumet appeared in a second experiment in “canned theatre” the following year, giving another impersonation of Jesus Christ as a boy in a filmed record of Maxwell Anderson’s stage play Journey to Jerusalem. “I loved being a child actor,” Lumet says. “I had ten rather marvelous years and it kept me off the streets.” Screen acting was a different matter, however: “That glass has a psychic and spiritual thing about it. The third eye. It’s going to see something you don’t want seen. I knew then that I could never be a really good [film] actor.”

Like many New York juvenile actors, Lumet was educated at Professional Children’s School. In 1942 he began a Columbia University extension course on dramatic literature, but dropped out after a term to enlist in the Army Signal Corps. The United States had just entered World War II and Lumet “felt very passionately about the warm very committed.” He saw service as a radio repairman in India and Burma.

After the war Lumet returned to the New York stage. In 1947, irritated by the pretensions of the newly formed Actors Studio, he founded an off-Broadway acting group of his own. The company had no director and Lumet drifted into this role, staging an assortment of noncommercial plays that were generally presented free except for contributions. At the same time Lumet scratched a living as a teacher of acting at the High school for Performing Arts and by taking occasional paid roles (including a well-received one in Arthur Goodman’s experimental play Seeds in the Wind).

In 1950 Lumet’s friend Yul Brynner, then a staff director with CBS-TV, invited him to join the network as an assistant director. He signed up the same day as Robert Mulligan. A year later, promoted to staff director, Lumet went to work on the Danger series, directing about 150 episodes between 1951 and 1953 and contributing to the I Remember Mama and You Are There series as well. He claims that “the split concentration it took was not as brutal as it sounds. It was a great training ground….It would take twenty films to learn what I learned from on-the-spot television.”

Beginning in 1953, Lumet also began to direct original plays for Playhouse 90, Kraft Television Theatre, and Studio One. In all, apart from the series work he continued to do, he filmed about two hundred teleplays during the “golden age” of American television, establishing himself as one of the most productive and respected directors in the business. He also took time out to direct for the theatre, staging productions of Shaw’s The Doctor’s Dilemma (1955) and Arch Oboler’s science-fiction drama Night of the Auk (1956).

By this time, the tremendous success of the motion picture Marty (1955), originally written for television by Paddy Chayefsky, and made by the television director Delbert Mann, had convinced Hollywood that there was a future in films of this sort—small scale (and low-budget) works of social realism, modeled on the television play,. A good deal of talent was seduced away from television to the big screen in the second half of the 1950s, and had a powerful influence—for good and bad—on the development of the cinema.

Lumet’s own first feature was Twelve Angry Men (1957), based on a play by Reginald Rose that had already been filmed for television by Franklin Schaffner. The movie studies a jury of twelve men who have to decide on the guilt or innocence of a youth accused of murdering his father. At the outset, all the jurors but one believe that the boy is guilty, but in the course of a long hot day of discussion and argument this stubborn individual (Henry Fonda) brings the others around, one by one, to an acknowledgement of “reasonable doubt.” In the process, we come to know very well the qualities and prejudices of the twelve.

An exceptionally talented cast was assembled to play the jurors, among them Jack Warden, Lee J. Cobb, E.G. Marshall, Ed Begley, Martin Balsam, Jack Klugman, and Robert Webber. Lumet made no attempt to “open up” the television play and shot almost the entire film in the jury room, where he made 385 set-ups. He saw in this claustrophobic setting a added source of tension, and he has explained how he and Boris Kaufman (the cinematographer of all his early films) set out to “restrict it more and more from a visual point of view. As the film went on I used longer and longer lenses so that the ceiling became closer to the heads, the walls became closer to the chairs…. This was all achieved between the choices of the lenses and the lighting.” Made in nineteen days at a cost of $343,000 Lumet’s first movie brought him an Oscar nomination and the Directors Guild award and took the Golden Bear (the main prize) at Berlin. In his article on Lumet in Film Quarterly (Winter 1967-1968), Graham Petrie writes that “the ‘message’ of the play, which survives into the film, now seems to many people dated and obvious, though it is worth remembering that the film offers no assumptions either way as to the guilt of the boy on trial….The structure of the film is made up of a series of small encounters, between individuals and groups, where the clash of personalities builds up to a climax, then relapses into lethargy or muted triumph. The rhythm of these encounters is carefully correlated with out increasing awareness of the spatial restrictions of the jury room, from which there is no escape until agreement is reached, and the reminders of the outside world during the pauses of slackened tension. The camera continually underlines the moral tensions of the situation, moving in to close-up as an individual is forced to come to terms with his own beliefs and prejudices, isolating the various conflicting groups in medium shot, slipping back to long-shot as the men relax in exhaustion after each encounter. It is through a brilliant manipulation of this kind of cinematic rhythm that Lumet obtains his effects, creating an unforgettable atmosphere of tension, hatred, fear, prejudice, and exhaustion.”

Discussing his transition from television to the feature film, Lumet has said that for him the adjustment was primarily an aesthetic one: “Technically I was totally prepared by the time I hit my first movie….The biggest adjustment I had to make—and it took me many years to learn this—was the adjustment of scale—the size of the picture. Moving from a seventeen-inch piece of glass to a thirty-five foot screen meant that a story had to be told in an entirely different way….The lenses remained the same, but the frame is so much more dynamic, accomplishes so much more for you so much more quickly.” Not tat Lumet had sundered his links with television. In
1958 he directed three notable and much-praised productions for Kraft Television Theatre—a trilogy of short plays by Tennessee Williams, an adaptation of Hemingway’s “Fifty Grand,” and one of Robert Penn Warren’s All the King’s Men.

Lumet’s next feature film (produced, like his first, by Henry Fonda) was Stage Struck (1958), an updating of the 1933 Katharine Hepburn hit Morning Glory about a New England girl pursuing glory on Broadway, herself pursued by Fonda and Christopher Plummer. Most critics found Susan Strasburg an inadequate substitute for Hepburn and the movie was a flop, as was That Kind of Woman (1958), a romance in which Sophia Loren has to choose between handsome Tab Hunter and rich George Sanders.

That Kind of Woman was scored and edited in Hollywood but, like most of Lumet’s films, shot in New York. Indeed, Lumet accepted a number of unpromising assignments in his early days as a director simply because they could be filmed in locations outside Hollywood, which he has frequently excoriated as “a company town... not fit for human habitation” and totally divorced from real life, where a director faces both studio interference and inflated production costs. He and Elia Kazan have both gone to considerable lengths to promote New York as an alternative filmmaking center.

Even The Fugitive Kind (1960) was shot in a Bronx studio and on location in upstate New York, though it is ostensibly set in a small town in Mississippi. This adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ play Orpheus Descending stars Marlon Brando as Val Xavier, the nightclub guitarist who drifts into Two Rivers and an ultimately disastrous affair with Lady (Anna Magnani), wife of the local storekeeper. ...

The director returned for a while to the theatre and television—a spectacular Broadway production of Albert Camus’ play Caligula; a docu-drama for NBC-TV about =Sacco and Vanzetti; and his famous Emmy-winning four-hour television version of Eugene O’Neill’s The Iceman Cometh, with Jason Robards Jr. in the lead. Jack Gould called it “A moment of enrichment and excitement unparalleled in the medium’s thirteen years.”

After four more productions for NBC’s Play of the Week, Lumet made another feature adapted from a stage play, Arthur Miller’s A View From the Bridge, scripted by Norman Rosten....As with The Fugitive Kind, Lumet stressed the naturalistic aspects of the story, playing down Miller’s allusions to classical tragedy. Again, the film failed to recover its costs, though it had a generally respectful critical reception. Isabel Quigley wrote that “Sidney Lumet, who was one of the white hopes of American outburst of realism in the cinema a few years ago... has done an interesting job....It could, of course, have turned into a very different sort of film, but Lumet, above all an honest and unfrilly director, has the temperament to dampen rather than fan hysteria and frightfulness, to give a feeling of enclosure and concentration to make tragedy domestic.”

Lumet repeats the trick in his screen version of Eugene O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey Into Night (1962), shot almost entirely in the living room of the Tyrones’ house in Connecticut. Ralph Richardson plays the fading actor James Tyrone, Katherine Hepburn, his drug-addicted wife Mary, Jason Robards Jr. his alcoholic son Edmund. This notable cast worked on a percentage basis, and the film was made for less than $500,000.

All four principals shared acting honors at Cannes. And Lumet received another Directors Guild award. Few of his films have been so hotly debated by the critics. Many of them thought it no more than “canned theatre,” and John Simon called it a work of “monumental but pedestrian veneration,” saying that “when, at the very end, Lumet permits himself some fancy, though old-fashioned camera movements, his endlessly receding camera... merely draws attention to unresolved incompatibilities between two art forms.”

Lumet himself, on the other hand, regards this as the best of all his films, and he has defended it vigorously, saying of his critics that “all their eyes were capable of seeing was scenery’ they didn’t know cinema technique from a hole in the wall. There was more sheer physical technique in that movie, in its editing and camerawork than anything you are likely to see for twenty years.”

Graham Petrie shares Lumet’s view of the film. And has explained why in some detail in his Film Quarterly article, saying that the director had “found the exact cinematic equivalent for the dramatic world created by O’Neill....The camera moves freely when required, but he is not afraid to film many of the speeches from a purely static set-up, with the result that the camera is never a distraction from...the language....Instead Lumet uses the camera to underline the emotional tone of the dialogue, isolating the characters from one another through close-ups, joining them together for brief moments of harmony and understanding, distancing them and studying them dispassionately during the pauses of drained and exhausted vitality...even without dialogue. One could follow the emotional progress of the film, and catch the emotional tone, simply from the way in which the camera moves among the characters....It is this restrained and intelligent use of cinematic resources which makes Long Day’s Journey Into Night Lumet’s best film, and one of the greatest films of the...decade.”

In the early 1960s, however, Lumet’s reputation was still far from secure, and his next film, Fail Safe (1964), about the threat of accidental nuclear war, was overwhelmed by the success of Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove (perhaps unfairly-some thought Fail Safe, in its documentary sobriety, a more telling warning than the audaciously witty Strangelove). Then Lumet’s long run of misfortune and semi-failure ended (to his own astonishment) with his adaptation of a somber novel by Edward Lewis Wallant, The Pawnbroker, which Lumet took over only two weeks before shooting began.

The pawnbroker of the title is Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), a Jewish immigrant who is morally numbed by suffering and the guilt he feels as the only member of his family to escape death in the Nazi camps. His pawnshop in Spanish Harlem is a front for the illegal activities of a black exploiter of the poor, but Nazerman, isolated in his own misery, is beyond compassion for the “scum rejects” around him. Then gradually, long-stifled memories of the past begin to stir in him, and with them a recognition that the suffering of this “scum” is...
not so different from the suffering of his own wife and children in Auschwitz. The film ends with Nazerman returning painfully to life.

There were critics who greatly disliked The Pawnbroker, seeing it as a collection of liberal platitudes rendered dishonest by the flashiness of the film’s style. Many admired it, however, and it enjoyed great commercial success. Rod Steiger received acting awards in both Britain and Germany, and Lumet the British Film Academy’s award as best director of the year.

The Hill (1965) was shot partly in Spain, partly at MGM Studios in England, with an almost entirely British cast.

An at least superficially different world is explored in The Group (1966), based on Mary McCarthy’s novel about eight Vassar graduates, set in New York during the Depression. The movie did better commercially than it did critically.

Lumet went back to England for the filming of The Deadly Affair (1967), the first picture he produced as well as directed. For this adaptation of John Le Carré’s somberly realistic spy-thriller Call for the Dead Lumet would have liked to shoot in black and white but bowed to the industry’s insistence that color was de rigueur for a major movie. Instead, he and his cinematographer Freddie Young worked out a technique called “pre-flashing”—muting the colors be pre-exposing the negative. The film was generally admired for this and for the performances of a fine cast that included James Mason, Simone Signoret, Maximilian Schell, Harriet Anderson, and Harry Andrews.

To an Early Grave, Wallace Markfields’s brilliant comic novel about the pilgrimage of four intensely competitive Jewish intellectuals in search of a friend’s funeral in the wastes of Brooklyn, provided the basis for Bye Bye Braverman (1968). Lumet called this his most personal film, saying that scouting its locations “was a cinch. I know all these neighborhoods like the back of my hand.” The film was nevertheless savaged by critics as aimless and self-indulgent, and Lumet himself feels he did not do justice to Herbert Sargent’s excellent script: “My control wasn’t firm enough, I wasn’t in command, and I edited it badly.”

Four of the stars of The Deadly Affair were reunited in The Sea Gull—Mason, Signoret, David Warner, and Harry Andrews—but in spite of this impressive cast, most critics found it a lumbering interpretation of Chekov’s play. And again Lumet seemed to be caught in such a rigid pattern of failure that critics began to prophesy the end of his intermittently brilliant career. The Appointment (1969), a “flimsy love story” with Omar Sharif and Anouk Aimée, was received with derision at Cannes, and Last of the Mobile Hot-Shots (adapted by Gore Vidal from a play by Tennessee Williams), was another commercial and critical flop.

The Anderson Tapes (1971) starring Sean Connery… [was] a brief recovery….Lumet’s reputation slumped again with Child’s Play (1972) and The Offense (1973), both adaptations of stage plays. And then came Serpico (1974), in which the director again demonstrated his extraordinary capacity for self-renewal. Serpico was based on Peter Maas’ best-selling biography of an idealistic young New York policeman who found himself a pariah in the NYPD because he refused to take bribes, blew the whistle on corrupt colleagues and superiors, and set in motion the processes that led to the Knapp Commission and a major shake-up of the entire Department. Along the way Serpico sacrificed his career, his girl, and almost his life, ending up as an almost saint-like loner. He is played in the film by Al Pacino, and Lumet had the benefit of an excellent script by Waldo Salt and Norman Wexler….

But Serpico, as Kael said, was “a big, big hit” and, after the unsuccessful Lovin’ Molly (1974), Lumet had another one in Murder on the Orient Express (1974), his star-studded adaptation of Agatha Christie’s 1930s thriller, with Albert Finney as Hercules Poirot. This immensely enjoyable movie, the most ambitious British production in years, was nominated for six Oscars, collected one (Ingrid Bergman as best supporting actress) and made a lot of money.

The vast majority of Lumet’s films have been literary or theatrical adaptations but he had an original script (by Frank Pierson) for Dog Day Afternoon (1975)…. A number of critics preferred Dog Day Afternoon even to Serpico, finding it richer both in its characterization and in its social implications. Vincent Canby thought it “not only the most accurate, most flamboyant of Sidney Lumet’s New York movies….it is the best film he has ever made, with the exception of A Long Day’s Journey Into Night…full of thoughts, feelings, and questions about the quality of a certain kind of urban civilization.”…

The Lumet juggernaut rolled on with Network (1976), his greatest commercial success. Scripted by Paddy Chayefsky, it centers on Howard Beale (Peter Finch), a fading TV anchorman who leaps to fame when he threatens public suicide and goes on to become a national institution—“a latter-day denouncing the hypocrisies of our time.” So long as his ratings remain high, he is treasured by the power-hungry network executives (Faye Dunaway, Robert Duvall, Ned Beatty), but as he becomes increasingly deranged and his public ravings take an unpopular turn, he forfeits his value as a pawn in their power plays, and is thrown (almost literally) to the lions.

Network won Oscars for Faye Dunaway and Finch, for Beatrice Straight as best supporting actress, and for Chayefsky, as well as nominations as best film and for Lumet, William Holden (who plays Howard Beale’s decent friend and colleague), Ned Beatty, Owen Roizman (the film’s cinematographer), and Alan Heim (its editor). In spite of these triumphs, however, and its blockbusting success at the box-office, it encountered a good deal of hostility from critics who found Paddy Chayefsky’s script “crazily preposterous” and the film’s vulgarity “more pronounced than the television vulgarity it was supposed to be satirizing.”

A screen version of Peter Shaffer’s play Equus followed….And almost no one had a good word to say for The Wiz (1978), Lumet’s first musical….

Lumet’s film, Prince of the City (1981), was considered one of the high points of his career. An ambitious film, two years in the making and running to nearly three hours, it was adapted for the screen by Jay Presson Allen from Robert Daly’s 1978 book about police corruption in New York City….Reviews were extraordinarily...
favorable. David Denby called it a tremendous movie, the culminating work of Sidney Lumet’s career,” and Andrew Sarris described it as a prodigious achievement.” “Lumet has never made a film as good,” he commented, “and it is possible that Prince of the City represents the high point of cinematic realism in the New York School of filmmaking.” Richard Schickel noted that Prince of the City is a very long film—close to three hours—but not a frame could be dispensed with. “The movie torments precisely because it so painfully details its protagonist’s slow, unaware descent into a nightmare of moral ambiguity that is indistinguishable from madness.”…

Lumet’s Daniel (1983), adapted by E. L. Doctorow from his novel The Book of Daniel, was controversial and drew a number of hostile reviews. The film is loosely based on the lives of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 for conspiring to pass atomic secrets to Russia.…. By contrast, Lumet’s next film, The Verdict (1983), with a script by David Mamet, was widely praised….“it is difficult to remember a courtroom drama of such efficiency as The Verdict,” Derek Malcolm noted, “nor better performances from Newman, woozily defending Right, or James Mason, contemplating the compensating vices of Might. It is a good strong melodrama which elicits good, strong performances.”

Garbo Talks (1984) was a slighter film, a teary comedy about a Jewish mother (Anne Bancroft) dying of cancer whose greatest wish is to meet her idol Greta Garbo…. Sidney Lumet is a small, good-humored man of awe-inspiring vitality. He has been married three times—to the actress Rita Gam, to Gloria Vanderbilt, and, since 1963, to Gail Jones, daughter of Lena Horne. The filmmakers Lumet most admires include the Italian neorealists, Jean Vigo, René Clair, William Wyler, Fred Zinnemann, and, above all, Carl Dreyer. Famous for bringing his films in on schedule or ahead of it, Lumet has often been accused of working too quickly and too carelessly. His response, given in 1970, is that “if you’re a director, then you’ve got to direct….I don’t believe that you should sit back and wait until circumstances are perfect before you and it’s all gorgeous and marvellous….I never did a picture because I was hungry; I could always earn a mine in television. Every picture I did was an active, believable, passionate wish. Every picture I did I wanted to do….I’m having a good time. I lead a nice life.”


Lumet’s film, Fail-Safe, deals with the dangers of the nuclear arms race and of its control by automation. Although made two years ago, it is only now being released—having been held up because of the similarity in story to Dr. Strangelove.

“Fail-Safe” was part of another project, actually. As you see, I keep looking for isolated little people to work with to stay away from studios s long as possible. Max Youngstein, a marvelous man who used to be one of the powers at United Artists, wanted to launch a company on the most logical basis I have ever heard. This was that we would all take just as much money as we needed to live on, which isn’t much, you can struggle along on a thousand a week if you watch cabs, tips and things like that. Max was going to do the profit participation, but not the way the big studios do it. The big thing he was going to break was the distribution fee, by having his own distribution company. He was going to begin at 22 percent, as opposed to the companies’ thirty-five, and within three years hope to be down to 18 percent which is what it should be costing. He got me involved, together with Johnny Frankenheimer and another….about three of us were going to do five pictures for him so that over three years he would have fifteen pictures which would give him a body to work with. It was very exciting.

“The first of these that we chose was Fail-Safe because we felt that kind of antiwar piece had a tremendous value. Also, we felt that it really could make money because it was an enormous bestseller in America. The company needed that kind of kick-off. The book was so well-known we wouldn’t have to spend a lot of money on actors and so on. After that we were going to do an Arthur Miller one-acter, two originals and a fifth one we hadn’t picked.”

Gordon Gow / 1975
SL: “…The use of close-ups will make a point clearer sooner than the use of words.

But now we’re into an old argument of mine. I think one of the misdirections that films went into was a confusion of cinema with scenery. If a scene took place against a mountain, it was a ‘movie’—but if it took place in a wallpapered room, it wasn’t. Well, that’s nonsense to me. Movie technique, to me, means using a camera and lighting, in addition to the script and the acting, to reveal more about human behaviour. The technique is making a contribution that no other means of doing it could make.” …

GG: The employment of close-ups for dramatic value as well as for character observation was again most fruitful in Fail-Safe, with Henry Fonda poised tensely at the telephone in a story destined to be regarded eventually as a straight-faced treatment of the kind of U.S.-Russian nuclear threat which Kubrick handled satirically in Dr. Strangelove. The thematic similarity of the two films came as a surprise to Lumet.

“I didn’t know anything about it until we’d finished shooting and were sued. I’d never read Peter George’s novel Red Alert, on which Dr. Strangelove was based. I knew we were dead as a movie as soon as Columbia bought us, because I knew they had done that to hold us off until Dr. Strangelove was released. But funny enough I think they made a mistake. Because although Dr. Strangelove did so well, I think it would have done even better coming out after us, rather than the other way around. The wry comment would have worked more effectively after the serious one.”

“A Conversation with Sidney Lumet” Michel Ciment, 1982
MC: The theme of informing against someone—the problem of knowing if one can or cannot “talk” and in what context, was this influenced by your own experience, since you were a witness and a
Emotionally this became the hardest element for me because I didn’t know myself what I thought of the issue. I had no definite opinion about Bob Leusi (Daniel Ciello in the film [Prince of the City]) and what he had done before seeing the first cut. I slowly realized that I had lived through this type of situation myself, and it became painful for me. In fact, at the beginning of the 1950s, when I was working in television, it was by sheer luck that I escaped being blacklisted. While I was working at the editing table, observing the main character, slowly I arrived at some conclusions. First of all, there is a difference between informing against someone in a criminal case versus a political one. For me, having been raised in a working-class environment, my family was poor, my attitude toward a stool pigeon was automatic, going beyond any logical distinction between the criminal and the political. An informer was an informer; it was that simple. I needed to make this film in order for my attitude to change, however. But squealing on someone for political reasons is a betrayal of democracy. On the other hand, I do think that drugs are responsible for the personal destruction of a whole generation of creative artists in this country, not to mention a large segment of the black population and of young people.

MC: This was the golden age of American television.

SL: Yes, those were marvelous years, when you think about how many screenwriters, directors, and actors emerged then. It proves one thing: that we were not all that exceptional but their talent was always there. You just need to give them the means to express it. The work pace was incredible. I directed two half-hour dramas very week during three years! I needed to have eight shows in my head all the time. While I rehearsed the two dramas of the week, I also had to take care of the casting for the following week, and of the sets and the costumes for two weeks after that.

In my experience television was irreplaceable, because the law of optics is constant, and it gave me a very fine visual training, not to mention everything I learned about editing, rhythm and acting. And also psychologically I learned a very precious lesson. The production you’re working on right now is not everything. There is another waiting for you the following week. It’s only a movie. The ephemeral nature of television taught me that in a positive way, because I have seen so many of my colleagues become pretentious. In their conversations I hear the words “grandeur” and “masterpiece.” For me, that is the beginning of the end. Each time you get started on another film, you cannot think in terms of a masterpiece, because at the very least, chance plays a role in every production. I don’t want to sound falsely modest, and it is true that chance, luck I mean, exists for some and not for others. But basically all one can do is set the stage and hope for the best. When this happens, the film takes on a life all its own that one could never have predicted. …The “old school” did not have this pretense of making only masterpieces, to make a movie every four years. You remember thirty films by John Ford, but he made over a hundred! I love fifteen films by Cukor, but he just finished his sixty-fifth one!

MC: When you went from television to cinema, what was the greatest change for you?

SL: The size of the image. And one of the more depressing things for me is the disappearance of the big screen movie theaters. In the multiplexes, the audience is looking at movie screens that are almost as small as TV screens. It took me a while to get used to the bigger image, which explains why my early films had such a closed sense of staging. My dramatic style had developed on a twelve-inch screen, and suddenly I was hitting the emotions too hard on a thirty-foot screen. Also in the theater I had been trained to exaggerate the feelings in order to touch the audience seated in the second balcony. It took me years before I understood that I didn’t have to do so much. Everything becomes clearer faster on a big screen. Also time flows differently on film than on television.

MC: What attracted you to Bob Daley’s novel [Serpico]?

SL: There is not a single character in this film whose behavior does not surprise us in the end. That is what made me so enthusiastic for this project, not to mention the basic idea, worthy of a Greek tragedy, whereby a man finds himself in a situation that he cannot control; rather the situation controls him.

M: That’s what happened to the characters in Fail-Safe.

SL: Yes, the only difference being that here, everything is authentic, everything happened exactly the way we show it. It reminds me of the old cliché—perfectly correct I might add—that the truth found in everyday facts is far richer than the wildest of fantasies. The difference with Serpico was that we wanted to study a character in depth, Frank Serpico, the hippie dressed as a cop.

MC: In most of your films, you are attached to a certain form of realism. What books or films have influenced you in that regard?

SL: It’s very complicated. First of all, like my father before me, I come from the theater. Like him, I was an actor. At the time, on Broadway, there was a very snobby attitude regarding Hollywood. That was where you went to make money. So I wasn’t going to let those films influence me. But I remember the French directors like Renoir, Vigo and Carné made a tremendous impression on me. The same goes with post-war Italian neo-realist cinema. And also people like Eisenstein and Dreyer. They all demonstrated to me the extraordinary diversity of cinema, from Dreyer’s highly stylized productions to Eisenstein’s surrealism, not to mention the simplicity of Renoir’s films. I did not see that spectrum in Hollywood productions. Not that Hollywood was completely lacking in worthwhile films, but it did not have nearly as much variety as European films. Furthermore, like any typical New York Jew, I was
fed on a variety of cultural offerings, from ballet to live music with everything in between.…

MC: You didn’t go to college?

SL: No. I went to Columbia for one semester, where I took some French literature courses before I enlisted. As a child actor, I went to professional children’s school from ten in the morning until three in the afternoon, and when I was on the road, I took correspondence courses. What a terrible education I got that way, but I was able to receive all my diplomas! For example, I knew nothing about science, but I discovered later when I was in the army that I loved it.

MC: At the age of seventeen, who did you enlist?

SL: Because of my political convictions, I was very left wing. I remember when I was twelve or thirteen, I wanted to join the International Brigades and go fight in Spain. So when the War broke out, I wanted to join the Marines. You could enlist at seventeen, whereas you had to be eighteen to join the Army. But they rejected me because of my poor eyesight. So I took a one-year training course in order to work in the radar service that the British had just developed. And I found myself on the Burmese front. I stayed in the army for five years. The experience that I gained was not worth the time that I spent there! Two years would have been enough, but I have no regrets because I wouldn’t have liked to do what my friends from the Group Theater were doing, which was to perform on the road in military camps. I would have preferred to be in Europe fighting Hitler, but during all this time I learned what was important and also what I could do without. My encounter with India and her religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, was also a fundamental life experience.…

MC: Do you work a great deal on the editing?

SL: I edit the movie in my head during the filming. That comes from my training in the theater and live television where I had to make choices ahead of time. I use very little film. For 12 Angry Men, we only used seventy-five thousand feet of film. I work very closely with the cinematographer. I plan every camera movement and choose the angles ahead of time.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2012 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXV:

Oct 23 THE STUNT MAN Richard Rush 1980
Oct 30 COME AND SEE Elem Klimov 1985
Nov 6 GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES Isao Takahata 1988
Nov 13 MAGNOLIA Paul Thomas Anderson 1999
Nov 20 RUSSIAN ARK Alexander Sokurov 2002
Nov 27 WHITE MATERIAL Claire Denis 2009
Dec 4 A SEPARATION Asghar Farhadi 2011

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com
...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com
....for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

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