Directed by John Huston
Script by Leonard Gardner, based on his novel
Produced by John Huston and Ray Stark
Cinematography by Conrad L. Hall
Edited by Walter Thompson
Production Design by Richard Sylbert
Set Decoration by Morris Hoffman
Costume Design by Dorothy Jeakins
Stunts: Nick Bullom and Rachel Schedler
Music supervisor: Marvin Hamlisch
Fight consultant: Al Silvani
First aid: Brad Siniard

Stacy Keach…Tully
Jeff Bridges…Ernie
Susan Tyrrell…Oma
Candy Clark…Faye
Nicholas Colasanto…Ruben
Art Aragon…Babe
Curtis Cokes…Earl
Sixto Rodriguez…Lucero
Billy Walker…Wes
Wayne Mahan…Buford
Ruben Navarro…Fuentes
Álvaro López…Rosales
Carl D. Parker…Paymaster
Al Silvani…Referee at Tully-Lucero Fight

**JOHN HUSTON (director)** (b. John Marcellus Huston, August 5, 1906, Nevada, Missouri – August 28, 1987, Middletown, Rhode Island) won best screenplay and best director Oscars for *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948). His other 48 films are:


RUBEN NAVARRO... Fuentes (August 5, 1946, Mexico) has two acting credits: 1997 “Walker, Texas Ranger” and 1972 Fat City.

Huston’s parents’ marriage—contracted at the St. Louis World’s Fair was never a great success, and in 1909 they separated, divorcing four years later. Huston spent his boyhood shuttling between them, spending most of the time with his mother, who became a journalist under her own name of Rhea Gore. With her he traveled the Midwest, picking up her taste for literature, horses, plush hotels, and gambling. He remained somewhat in awe of her, though, feeling that she despised him as a romantic fantasist. “Nothing I ever did pleased my mother,” he later remarked.

He was far more at ease with his father, who when not acting in New York would take him on the vaudeville circuit, staying in hotels that were anything but plush. Huston thoroughly relished the contrast, and was enthralled by the theatrical low-life he encountered. But at twelve he was found to be suffering from Bright’s disease and an “enlarged heart.” The boy was placed in a sanatorium in Phoenix, Arizona, and told he must henceforth live as a cautious invalid. Rebelling, he took up secret midnight swimming in a nearby river. After some months, this pastime was discovered, and it was decided that he must have made a fortunate recovery.

His mother, who had remarried, moved to Los Angeles, where Huston attended Lincoln High School. As if making up for lost time, he plunged into a multitude of interests: abstract painting, ballet, English and French literature, opera, horseback riding, and boxing. At fifteen he dropped out of high school, becoming one of the state’s top-ranking amateur lightweights (with a permanently flattened nose) while studying at the Art Students League in Los Angeles.

He was also “infatuated” with the cinema, though as yet only as a spectator. “Charlie Chaplin was a god, and William S. Hart. I remember the enormous impact the UFA films had on me, those of Emil Jannings and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. I saw this many times.”

Walter Huston had moved over from vaudeville to the legitimate theatre, and in 1924 achieved fame on Broadway with the lead in O’Neill’s Desire Under the Elms. Watching his father’s rehearsals, Huston was deeply impressed by O’Neill’s work and fascinated by the mechanism of acting: “What I learned there, during those weeks of rehearsal, would serve me for the rest of my life.” He himself acted briefly with the Provincetown Players in 1924. The following year, recovering from a mastoid operation, he took a long vacation in Mexico, where among other adventures he rode as an honorary member of the Mexican cavalry. On his return, Huston married a friend from high school, Dorothy Harvey. The marriage lasted barely a year.

He had begun to write short stories, one of which was published by H.L. Mencken in the American Mercury. Further pieces, clearly influenced by Hemingway, appeared in Esquire, the
New York Times, and other journals He also wrote Frankie and Johnny, “a puppet play with music (the music being by Sam Jaffe). This was produced in Greenwich Village by Ruth Squires and published in book form. Through his mother, Huston was given a job on the New York Graphic. “I had no talent as a journalist whatever and I was fired oftener than any reporter ever has been within such a limited time. There was a kind-hearted city editor who kept hiring me back.” When even that man’s patience ran out, Huston headed for Hollywood, where his father had moved with the coming of talkies.

Huston was hired as a scenarist by Goldwyn Studios, spent six months there with no assignments, and then moved to his father’s studio, Universal, where he collaborated on four scripts, two of them for films starring his father: A House Divided and Law and Order. His colleagues had no doubt of his talent, but one of them described him at this time as “just a drunken boy, hopelessly immature.” After a lethal automobile accident in which he was the driver, he “wanted nothing so much as to get away” and left Universal for a job at Gaumont-British in London. Unhappy there, he quit again and lived rough for a while, before bumming his way to Paris and eventually back to New York. After a brief stint as a journalist there and a few months with the WPA Theatre in Chicago, he returned to Hollywood in 1937 and went to work as a writer for Warner Brothers.

Newly married to Leslie Black, Huston now seemed ready to settle to a serious career as a screenwriter. His first credit was for William Wyler’s Jezebel (1937); this was followed by The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse (1938), and two of Warner’s prestigious biopics, Juarez (1939) and Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet (1940). Dr. Ehrlich won Huston an Academy Award nomination, as did his next script, for Howard Hawks’ Sergeant York (1941). He was now successful enough to persuade the studio that, if his next script was a hit, he should be allowed a chance to direct. “They indulged me rather. They liked my work as a writer and they wanted to keep me on. If I wanted to direct, why, they’d give me a shot at it, and if it didn’t come off all that well, they wouldn’t be too disappointed as it was to be a very small picture.”

Huston’s next script was for High Sierra (1941). Directed by Raoul Walsh, it gave Humphrey Bogart, as a gunman on the run, his breakthrough to stardom, and provided Huston with the hit he wanted. Warners kept his word and offered him his choice of subject. He chose Dashiell Hammett’s thriller, The Maltese Falcon, which had already been adapted twice by Warners, both times badly. Wisely, Huston stuck closely to the original, taking over much of Hammett’s dialogue unchanged, and filming with a clean, uncluttered style that provided a cinematic equivalent to the novel’s fast, laconic narrative. He also benefited from a superb cast. George Raft was offered the role of the private eye Sam Spade but turned it down (as he had previously with the lead in High Sierra). Bogart, who liked Huston, was happy to take over, supported by Mary Astor, Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet (in his first film role), Elisha Cook, Jr. and—in a walk-on part “for luck”—Walter Huston.

The Maltese Falcon (1941) was made on a small, B-picture budget, and put out by Warners with minimal publicity. They were taken aback by the enthusiastic response of public and critics. The latter immediately hailed the film as a classic, and it has since been claimed as the best detective melodrama ever made. “It is hard to say,” wrote Harold Barnes in the Herald Tribune, “whether Huston the adapter or Huston the fledgling director, is more responsible for this triumph.” Already, in his directorial debut, many of Huston’s characteristic preoccupations appear. The plot is a web of deceptive appearances; characters and even objects (including the coveted falcon itself) are duplicitous and untrustworthy, and the hero himself is not what he seems. Spade, outwardly a cynical opportunist, proves to be driven by a scrupulous personal code. “When a man’s partner is killed,” he says, turning the woman he wants over to justice, “he’s supposed to do something about it.”

...A few days before shooting was complete on Across the Pacific, Huston received his army induction papers. Appropriately, his first assignment as a documentary filmmaker for the Signal Corps was across the Pacific—in the Aleutian islands off Alaska. The resulting film, Report From the Aleutians (1943) was described in the New York Times as “one of the war’s outstanding records of what our men are doing. It is furthermore an honest record.” Promoted to captain, Huston was sent to Italy to make The Battle of San Pietro (1944) regarded as one of the finest combat documentaries ever filmed. “No war film I have seen,” wrote James Agee in The Nation, “has been quite so attentive to the heaviness of casualties, and to the number of yards gained or lost, in such an action.”...Huston’s ironic realism disconcerted the War Department. One general accused him of having made “a film against war,” eliciting the response: “Well, sir, when I make a picture that’s for war—why I hope you take me out and shoot me.” Despite this, he was promoted to major and awarded the Legion of Merit.

His last film for the army was Let There Be Light (1945), on the rehabilitation of soldiers suffering from combat neuroses. The overtly optimistic message was constantly undercut by the compassionate objectivity of the filming, which for Huston was “practically a religious experience.” The War Department shelved the picture, but it was finally given general release in 1980. Noting “its voice-over narration [provided by Walter Huston], its use of wipes and dissolves, and its full-orchestra soundtrack music,” Vincent Canby called it “an amazingly elegant movie.”

Discharged from the Army in 1945, Huston returned to Hollywood, where he was divorced from his second wife. After a brief, spectacular affair with Olivia de Havilland, he married the actress Evelyn Keyes in 1946....

At this period Huston had a reputation—which he did little to discourage—as one of the wild men of Hollywood. Along with such friends as Bogart and William Wyler, he indulged in frequent and well-publicized bouts of drinking, gambling, and general horseplay. ...Jack Warner, though autocratic, was ready to tolerate a lot in return for talent and box-office success. He even let himself be persuaded—though with considerable misgivings—to allow Huston to shoot his next film almost entirely on location, and in Mexico. At the time, this was a radical move.
The results justified it. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) is generally agreed to be one of Huston’s finest films. ...*Treasure* has often been cited as the archetypal Huston movie, though the director himself denies the presence of any authorial unity in his films. I fail to see any continuity in my work from picture to picture—what’s remarkable is how different the pictures are, one from another. In fact, though Huston’s cinematic style varies according to the nature of his subject matter, clear thematic preoccupations can be seen to recur throughout his work. The classic “Huston movie” concerns a quest, often a parody of one of society’s sanctioned forms of endeavor—the pursuit of wealth, power, religious knowledge, imperial sovereignty—which is destined, after initial success, to end in failure and futility. (This kind of denouement became known in the trade as “the Huston ending.”)...

The art, technique, and moral implications of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (as of *The Maltese Falcon*) have since been discussed in great detail by many critics. ...Warners were less circumspect over Huston’s next film, his fourth with Bogart. *Key Largo* (1948) was adapted from a prewar play by Maxwell Anderson, originally written in blank verse. Huston and his co-scriptwriter Richard Brooks, junked the verse and updated the plot….To Huston’s annoyance, the studio cut several scenes from the final release. Not long before this, Huston had been refused permission, under the terms of his contract, to direct a play by his idol Eugene O’Neill for the Broadway stage. Angered by these incidents, Huston left Warners when his contract expired.

Together with Sam Spiegel and Jules Buck, Huston founded Horizon Films. The new company’s first feature was a courageous failure. Huston had been among the strongest opponents of HUAC and the Hollywood blacklist, and when John Garfield came under pressure, Huston offered him the lead on *We Were Strangers* (1949) as a deliberate gesture of defiance—the more so since the prophetic plot concerned a revolution in Cuba against a corrupt dictatorship. It was attacked on release by both left and right. It was also a box-office disaster, and Huston admitted that “it didn’t turn out to be a very good picture.” Needing funds, he signed a short-term contract with MGM.

Having refused *Quo Vadis*—despite an amazing episode when Louis B. Mayer (according to Huston) “crawled across the floor and took my hands and kissed them” in order to persuade him to reconsider—Huston took on a far more congenial subject in *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). Based on a novel by W.R. Burnett (author of *Little Caesar* and *High Sierra*), this was the progenitor of a long cycle of “caper movies,” in which a crime (here a million-dollar jewel theft) is successfully carried out by sympathetically depicted criminals, only to fail through subsequent ill-chance or internal dissension. Huston was breaking new ground in presenting crime as an occupation like any other, “a left-handed form of human endeavor” carried out by ordinary people motivated not by the megalomaniac will to power of the 1930s movie gangsters, but simply by the desire to feed their families or realize some small private ambition…. That same year, 1950, Huston was amicably divorced from Evelyn Keyes; one day later he married Enrica Soma. In August, while *Asphalt Jungle* was still filming, his father died of a heart attack. Huston’s second picture for MGM was... *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), taken from Stephen Crane’s novel of the Civil War….Huston left for Africa to make a film for Sam Spiegel, his partner in Horizon Films.

The script of *The African Queen* (1951) was taken from C.S. Forester’s novel and written by Huston in collaboration with his greatest critical supporter, James Agee….Filming, on location in the Congo and Uganda, took place under appalling conditions: not only extreme heat and humidity, but dysentery, malaria, mosquitoes, crocodiles and safari ants beset actors and crew. Everybody became ill except Bogart, Lauren Bacall (who came to keep Bogart company) and Huston, who all ascribed their immunity to copious quantities of Scotch….The film was a huge popular success, and won Bogart the only Oscar of his career.

Through some financial sleight-of-hand, little of the profits from *The African Queen* ever reached Huston, who consequently pulled out of Horizon Films. For his next three films he acted as his own producer….Meanwhile, disgusted by the HUAC “witch-hunt” and the “moral rot” it had induced in the entertainment industry, Huston had moved to Ireland. He had bought a house in Galway, St. Clerans, and moved there in 1952 with his wife Enrica and their children Anthony and Angelica. Twelve years later he took Irish citizenship....

After two financially unsuccessful picture [*Beat the Devil* and *Moby Dick*]...deep in debt...he accepted a three-picture contract with 20th Century-Fox... *Heaven Knows, Mr Allison* (1957), teaming Robert Mitchum and Deborah Kerr as a marine and a nun stranded on a Japanese-held island during World War II, struck many reviewers as an attempt to repeat *The African Queen*. Huston coscripted, and enjoyed working with Mitchum, whom he considers “one of the really fine actors of my time.”

...A retrospective atmosphere of doom hangs over the *Misfits* (1961). Clark Gable died shortly after shooting was finished. Marilyn Monroe never completed another film. Montgomery Clift and Thelma Ritter were dead within a few years….Huston had conceived the idea of making a film about Freud while working on *Let There Be Light*. He now invited Jean-Paul Sartre to prepare a script. Sartre did so—four hundred pages of it. Huston tactfully suggested that cuts might be necessary, and he and Sartre went over the script together. Sartre returned to Paris, and in due course submitted his revised script—of six hundred pages. With the help of Charles Kaufman, who had coscripted *Let There Be Light*, the scenario was pruned to a manageable hundred and fifty pages, although Sartre disowned it.
**Freud: The Secret Passion** (1962) is not a conventional biopic, but rather an intellectual detective story, in which Freud is shown tracking down, in himself as much as in others, the psychosexual source of the guilt which torments them… By way of relaxation, Huston turned to a spoof murder mystery, *The List of Adrian Messenger* (1963), in which the villain, played by Kirk Douglas, appears in numerous elaborate disguises. As an additional gimmick, the film features various guest stars, also heavily disguised. Response was mainly puzzled…

“The Huston ending” wherein all human activities culminate in ironic futility and disaster was notably absent from *The Night of the Iguana* (1964). Huston and his co-scriptwriter, Anthony Veiller, took a characteristically overheated and doom-laden play by Tennessee Williams and transformed it into a melodramatic farce with a happy ending. Amazingly, Williams went along with their changes and even helped with the script…

While *Iguana* was doing well at the box office, Huston was visited in Ireland by Dino de Laurentis, who planned to film *The Bible*. He envisaged a multiplicity of episodes, each with its own eminent director. Eventually, the producer modestly limited himself to half the Book of Genesis, with Huston as sole director. Huston also played Noah and the voice of God….The film finally cost eighteen million—by far the most expensive of Huston’s career—and received atrocious notices…

In *Fat City* (1972) Huston drew on the boxing world of his youth. Unlike most fight movies, though, the film offered its characters no moment of glory in the big time; these were the small-time losers on the lower fringes of the sport, failures and derelicts never more than a step away from defeat. Filmed in muted, smoky tones in the bars, tenements, and pool-halls of dead-end Stockton, California, *Fat City* offers the clearest statement of Huston’s fascination with defeat, and the small vestiges of dignity that can be salvaged from it. As a washed-up fighter, Stacy Keach gave the performance of a lifetime. Critics hailed the film as a return to form, and John Russell Taylor described it as “one of those late films by old masters that look effortless because they are effortless.”…

Huston had long cherished an ambition to film Kipling’s story *The Man Who Would Be King*. Originally he planned it with Gable and Bogart; then with Peter O’Toole and Richard Burton. It finally reached the screen with Sean Connery and Michael Caine in the leading roles as the two British soldiers who set up a private kingdom in the wild mountains of Afghanistan. For once, delay proved beneficial. As Huston remarked, his modern actors brought “a reality to it that the old stars could not do. Today they would seem synthetic, so in a way I’m glad I didn’t make the picture with them.” Certainly it would be hard to imagine the film done better. There is a sweep and grandeur, a legendary resonance to the narrative for which the misused term “epic” is for once wholly appropriate. For the first time in a decade, Huston achieved success at the box office as well as with the critics, and he and Gladys Hill were nominated for an Academy Award for their screenplay. After *The Man Who Would Be King*, Huston underwent heart surgery and as a result produced no feature films for four years. Any speculation, though, that his career as a director might be over was answered by *Wise Blood* (1979)…

An unmixed success was *Prizzi’s Honor* (1985), based on the book by Richard Condon, starring Jack Nicholson, Katherine Turner, William Hickey and Huston’s daughter Anjelica (who won an Oscar for best supporting actress).…After this success, Huston set to work on an adaptation of James Joyce’s story “The Dead,” which he completed shortly before his death.

Robin Wood wrote of Huston in Richard Roud’s *Cinema* that “the problem lies in tracing any significant unifying or developing pattern through his career as a whole… This is but one of several signs—though a crucial one—that Huston is not a major artist, though he has at different stages of his career been mistaken for one.” This is the view that has dominated serious discussion of Huston’s work since the rise of auteurist criticism in the 1960s. But Andrew Sarris, once one of the director’s most dismissive critics, wrote in 1980 that “what I have always tended to underestimate in Huston was how deep in his guts he could feel the universal experience of pointlessness and failure.”…

Richard T. Jameson maintains that “we do encounter a cohesive world-view, not only thematically, but also stylistically; there is a Huston look,” though one extremely difficult to define…

In his last years, Huston pursued a parallel career as a film actor. In 1963 he was invited by Otto Preminger to portray a Boston prelate in *The Cardinal* and virtually stole the picture. Then, besides taking key roles in several of his own films, he appeared in a wide variety of works directed by others: most notably as the sinister patriarch Noah Cross in Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974), and as Teddy Roosevelt’s adviser John Hay in Milius’s *The Wind and the Lion* (1975). Huston evidently enjoyed acting and invariably denied that he took it at all seriously. “It’s a cinch,” he maintained, “and they pay you damn near as much as you make directing.”


Why has Huston’s artistic personality gone more or less unremarked for so long? Briefly, his neglect seems to be a consequence partly of the history of taste and fashion among critics and academics in film studies, and partly of a stylistic finish so smooth and self-effacing that it conceals its remarkable art as straightforward. Generic story-telling (if such a thing exists). Huston’s art looks to us, I suspect, as Shakespeare’s did to his contemporaries: like nature itself.
James Agee, in his enormously influential 1950 Life magazine portrait established this understanding: “Each of Huston’s pictures has a visual tone and style of its own, dictated to his camera by the story’s essential content and spirit.”

James Naremore characterizes Huston’s method by contrasting it with Dashiell Hammett’s: “Hammett’s art is minimalist and deadpan, but Huston, contrary to his reputation, is a highly energetic and expressive storyteller who like to make comments through his images.

To my knowledge, at least thirty-four of Huston’s thirty-seven features films derive directly from novels, stories, or plays.

Huston began in the movies as a writer of screenplays…. He has spoken of the intimate connection between writing and directing: “There’s really no difference between them, it’s an extension, one from the other. Ideally I think the writer should go on and direct the picture. I think of the director as an extension of the writer.”

Implicit in early works like The Maltese Falcon, In This Our Life, and Key Largo (‘48), themes of identity continue to dominate at the end of Huston’s career in Prizzi’s Honor and The Dead.

In a 1981 interview, Huston spoke of his first film as “a dramatization of myself, how I felt about things.”

**An Interview with John Huston**

**David Brandes, 1977**

DB: Mr. Huston, you’re a writer, you’re a director, and you’re an actor. And you’re famous in all three areas. Which do you prefer?

JH: I don’t make a distinction between writing and directing. But to write and direct one’s own material is certainly the best approach. The directing is kind of an extension of the writing. So far as the acting is concerned, that’s just a sort of lark—a well-paid lark, I might add—to relieve the responsibilities of being a director.

DB: Why would a creative person like yourself become a filmmaker rather than, say, a novel writer?

JH: I was raised in the tradition of films—that is, like so many children of my generation, we looked to the screen for our heroes; we imitated and emulated William S. Hart; people like Hart and Chaplin were gods. The films were every bit as much alive as literature, and I was always fascinated by films. So I started out to become a writer but I wasn’t aware I wanted to become a director until after I had written for films for several years. Then I decided I could do my own material better than someone else. So I really just drifted into directing….

DB: What about the writing itself? Is there anything about the screenplay form which makes it appeal to you?

JH: The ideal screenplay has a kind of discipline. You must make your points with a certain clarity and decisiveness which makes the ideal screenplay closer to poetry than to the novel. I find the form itself attracts me.

DB: Yet poetry is such a pure form whereas film seems to be much more of a composite, so much less pure.

JH: I think of pictures as being quite pure when they are truly realized. And closer, perhaps, to the thought processes than any other form. The ideal picture is almost as though the reel were behind your own eyes and you were projecting your own thoughts. It’s only when the picture falters that your thoughts stumble as a result of the picture’s faltering. Something “wrong” appears on the screen and the dream is broken….

I don’t make drawings anymore, but there’s a logic to shooting a scene. After your first shot, everything else falls into place. And shooting on location as I do and not in the studio, the circumstances usually tell you what the first shot is going to be.

By the way, I’d like to make an observation here. Very seldom does an audience realize what you’re doing with the camera. When the camera is performing at its best, the audience isn’t aware of it. It’s so close to the thought process that you’re watching the scene, not the movement of the camera—no matter what kind of ballet it might be doing.

As a rule, I think of the camera as part of the scene. It’s the camera as protagonist. You enter the scene through the camera’s eyes. It has a physiological function. Like the physiology of the cut. Try this little trick yourself. Look at something directly in front of you. Then look at something to the direct right of you. You’ve made a complete right angle. But notice that in doing it you blink your eyes. In other words, because you’re familiar with the whole area in between, you blink it out and go directly from point A to point B. That is a cut.

Only when the intervening space—the relationship between those two objects—is important do you pan. If it isn't important, you cut….

**from An Open Book, John Huston Knopf NY 1980**

I [Huston] came well to my very first directorial assignment. The Maltese Falcon was a very carefully tailored screenplay, not only scene by scene, but set-up by set-up. I made a sketch of each set-up. If it was to be a pan or dolly shot, I’d indicate it. I didn’t want ever to be at a loss before the actors or the camera crew. I went over the sketches with Willy Wyler. He had a few suggestions to make, but on the whole, approved what he saw. I also showed the sketches to my producer, Henry Blanke. All Blanke said was, “John, just remember that each scene as you shoot it, is the most important scene in the picture.” That’s the best advice a young director could have.

**from John Huston Interviews, Edited by Robert Emmet Long, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2001.**
Making a film is like every other undertaking in life. Its success depends on whether or not you’re equipped for it. And I’m not referring to learning. I don’t know that I’ve learned a hell of a lot. I think I was probably as good a director at the beginning as I am now. Oh I’ve probably learned a few small technical things. But I’m not sure my understanding has deepened since I was nine years old.

DV: Do you feel a film like Jaws will have the same appeal over time?

JH: I haven’t seen Jaws so I can’t comment on it. But good films—truly good films—will endure. Granted the camera used to turn at a different speed and the acting style was one of exaggerated delivery. Today we’re closer to reality. Figures on the screen move at the same pace we do in life. And the style has changed, of course. But a Chaplin film is as good today as it was then.

DB: What is your opinion of the state of the art today?

JH: One of the ill effects of the modern set up of the industry is that if a picture isn’t immediately successful, they won’t risk any more money publicizing it. I’ve seen a number of fine films that the public was barely able to see. Like The Traveling Executioner with Stacy Keach, or Walkabout from Australia. I think Altman’s McCabe and Mrs. Miller was a kind of masterpiece. Midnight Cowboy was a wonderful film. Beautiful pictures—and our loss, as a result of the present economic set up.

On the other hand, Earthquake, Towering Inferno, etc. I haven’t seen them and I’m not drawn to them because they seem to contain a formula. What I hear about them doesn’t sufficiently attract me. I’d rather read a book.

“Saints and Stinkers: The Rolling Stone Interview” Peter S. Greenberg, 1981

“At first I didn’t know what was going on with the man,” says Caine, who last worked with Huston on The Man Who Would Be King. We were on location in Morocco, and I’d do a scene with Sean [Connery], and we’d finish it and John would say ‘cut,’ and then we’d do the next scene on the first take as well. I never thought the movie would work. And then I saw the movie. It was wonderful. Most directors today don’t know what they want so they shoot everything they can think of. They use the camera like a machine gun. John uses it like a sniper.”

Almost every movie you make is filmed on location. Any movies you would rather have done on a back lot? Heavens, no. If I have a trademark at all, it’s that I prefer to make my movies where they happen. I was on one of the first location pictures, Treasure of the Sierra Madre. And African Queen would have been very difficult to do on the back lot of some studio. The point is that in a sense it’s easier to just do it than to fabricate it.

Was Moby Dick the most wretched location experience you’ve ever had?

No, it was in Africa making The Roots of Heaven. That was the most physically difficult. Temperatures were quite unbelievable. One didn’t eat, myself included. But Moby Dick was difficult. It was the worst winter in maritime history. Three of our lifeboats capsized. We just had one storm after another, wretched storms. Certainly once we were on our way to the bottom. And three times I thought we were. We had started out with three mechanical whales, and we lost two of them. And I knew that if we lost the third one, we were shit out of luck. This was our last hope. So I just got in the whale, and I stayed there. I knew they’d have to rescue it if I was in it. If that whale had gone, the picture would have died. Every day we would go out to sea. That didn’t take long, but as soon as we got out, the storms would just surround us—longboats would be separated, and everything would become disordered and chaotic.

I guess by today’s standards, if you were that far behind, they might have stopped the picture.

By today’s standards, it’s nothing to be a few weeks behind. Think of Apocalypse Now. I thought there were wonderful things about it, some unbelievable things, but I thought it was a poor picture. It didn’t know what to do with itself.

There is no plot to Heart of Darkness. It’s an atmosphere, and it’s a wonderful evocation, but it isn’t a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

And there were absurdities in the film. I mean, why do they all go up the river in a boat, when they can take a helicopter and go up the river? And so on. The nonsense of that American placement of light and so on and the bombing area….And showing a bridge all lit up at night. It’s absurd. Coppola took refuge. He escaped into the metaphysical at the finish. And, you know, shithouse writers have been doing that since time immemorial.

The problem is that the concept of story can very easily be misunderstood. I mean, a story is not necessarily something that’s as wooden as a first, second, and third act, or that comes out with a moral and a message or something that’s all underscored and in italics and capitalized.

That’s not what I mean. Peer Gynt has a dramatic structure. And even Tennessee Williams has a dramatic structure. When we were doing African Queen—and we were just about to film it—I discovered myself without a story. That’s why I say I can put myself in Coppola’s boot. Luckily I found the ending well before starting the cameras.

At what point did you decide that you were going to let Katherine Hepburn and Bogart sink that ship?

I wrote the finish in Africa. I didn’t feel that it should have an unhappy ending. It wasn’t that kind of a picture.

From The Hustons, Lawrence Grobel. Charles Sertibner’s Sons, NY 1989
Keach, who considered it the best work he ever did. “I learned so much about not only acting but also directing. He was used to being an actor, so he knew actors and let them find their way. Then he would point the camera.”

John “never intellectualized about motivation,” according to Keach, “or about objectives. He worked with actors the way a conductor works with a great orchestra. There was nobody like him.”

For the fight scenes between Keach and Mexican fighter Lucero, played by Sixto Rodriguez, a one-time light-heavyweight contender, Keach worked with José Torre carefully staging the bout, but when it came time to film it, Huston said, “All right boys, now we’re just going to have two minutes of boxing. Just go out there and fight!”

The direction surprised Keach, and he wondered if this was one of those practical jokes he had heard Huston loved to play, or perhaps it was “that quasi-sadistic element that people told about John. Huston said that he wanted Keach to fight, but that he fully expected Rodriguez to hold back.

But tell that to Keach. “Every time I would hit this guy,” he remembered, “he couldn’t help it, his left hand would come out and he really got me good. That shot is in the film. There’s nothing fake about it, when I go down to the mat, it’s real!”

The single Judy Collins was Keach’s girlfriend at the time, and as she watched her man being pounded, Huston patted her on the shoulder and said, “It’s only a movie, my dear.”

Jeff Bridges also had to fight in the movie and shuddered whenever John would tease him: “We’re going to put you in a fight with some real guys and see how you do.” And when his fight scene was filmed, he, too, got nailed. “I got cut,” Bridges said, “real blood was coming out.”

Knowing Huston’s need for a diversion when not filming, Ray Stark worried that John would get bored in Stockton. “The only entertainment was women’s roller derby every Friday night,” Stark recalled. But John managed. Stacy Keach said that Stark would often run movies after dinner, and one night he showed The Battle of San Pietro and Let There Be Light. Afterwards John talked for hours about them.…. John also wasn’t well during Fat City, and often had to use an oxygen tank to help him breathe. Yet he continued to smoke his cigars each day and cough himself to sleep at night.…. He [Huston] described a special screening of Fat City he had for Mohammed Ali in Dublin before his fight with Blue Lewis and how Ali had shouted at the screen, “That’s the way it is!”

Huston was asked what “fat city” meant. “It’s a jazz musician’s term,” he explained. “A dreamer’s term, meaning no boundaries to the possibilities. It’s the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.”

Huston had been developing a project with Ray Stark about two down-and-out small-time boxers, one hoping to come up, the other to come back. Fat City, a novel written by Leonard Gardner, captured the gritty, low-down world of boxing. “It’s about people who are beaten before they start but who never stop dreaming.”

John said. When Stark first approached him about it, Huston saw it once again, as a perfect vehicle for Marlon Brando. The two men went to see Brando, who was in London, but Brando was involved in causes then and wouldn’t commit.

“Then” John said, “in Spain, they were shooting a picture about Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp with a young actor, Stacy Keach, I went over to see him and was shown some film on him. I was very impressed.”

Keach, who was twenty-nine when John showed up on the set in Madrid, was aware of John’s sliding reputation, but it didn’t tarnish his legend. “I just felt he was going through a period that every artist goes through some time or another,” Keach said. “He came with an offer in hand and was very excited about Fat City. Particularly because he had experiences himself as a boxer.”

Keach was signed to play Billy Tully, the older fighter. Huston heard about an actor Burgess Meredith had recently directed in The Yin and Yang of Mr. Go. Jeff Bridges had also appeared in The Last Picture Show, and Huston thought he might be right for the younger fighter, Ernie Munger.

John saw Fat City as a picture “about hope and failure, great misery alongside great wealth.” It was his first American film since The Misfits eleven years before. What John wanted was the look, the smell, the feel of those dank, depressed towns to which fighters traveled in order to beat their brains out in front of drunken, boisterous crowds. He found exactly what he was looking for in California, on Stockton’s skid row.

“I always had the feeling that there was the hand of somebody very special on the pulse of that film,” said Stacy
COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2013 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXVI:

Mar 5 Volker Schlöndorff, The Tin Drum 1979
Mar 19 Mike Leigh, Naked 1993
Mar 26 Michael Cimino, Heaven’s Gate 1980
Apr 2 Paul Thomas Anderson, Punch-Drunk Love 2002
Apr 9 Sidney Lumet, Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead 2007
Apr 16 Zack Snyder, Watchmen 2009
Apr 23 Marleen Gorris, Within the Whirlwind 2009

CONTACTS:...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu...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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