

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPEN HEARTH

An Introduction to the Film Script, by Jean Shepherd

The Phantom of the Open Hearth is loosely based on certain selected episodes from two closely related, previously published books. The first is *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*, a novel, and the second is entitled *Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories and Other Disasters*, which is, in effect, a sequel to the first volume. *The Phantom of the Open Hearth* is not an adaptation in any sense of the word, since the novel itself covers a much greater time span and has its own integral story line that is not found in *Phantom*. The same characters as in the novel are used, with some alteration.

I've always found that it is not a good idea to try to translate literally to the screen material that works very well on the printed page. For one thing, somebody reading a novel or a short story is simply not an audience. He is alone, and has even virtually eliminated his own body. He is a pure mind that has transported itself out of the here and now and is wandering in an imaginary landscape, eavesdropping on imaginary conversations and drawing its own independent conclusions. Somebody deeply immersed, submerged, in fact, in a novel is not even aware of people in the same room, or what time of day it is; if it is winter or summer, or if a tornado is coming over the next hill. This is why some people become virtually addicted to reading. It becomes a form of narcotic, and the greatest lead shield against reality that man ever created.

In a sense the movies are somewhat similar, but just barely. When I say "movies," I mean a film seen in its own environment, in a movie house on a large screen, with the accompanying aroma of popcorn and sagging seats. The very size of the screen itself, the overwhelming sound track, is enough to make many totally unbelievable scenes *seem* real, even though one little part of your mind keeps hollering "Baloney!" Nevertheless, in a darkened auditorium it is easy for most people to forget their own

sion year. It was the only film to be nominated that year in those three important categories. Naturally, this included major shows from all the national networks. It has recently been selected by the Milan Film Festival as a nominee for Best Film and the Prix d'Italia. At this writing the film is scheduled for network-wide replays in the near future. It was extremely well received by audiences coast to coast and, all in all, we feel that we accomplished what we set out to do, which is about all anyone can hope for when involved in such a complex creation, which requires the talents of dozens of people and the skills of many artisans. I thank them all.

Jean Shepherd
Washington, N.J., 1977

between the Narrator and himself. The Narrator is both viewing the scene as it occurred or as he lived it and commenting to you about it, but never directly. He tells you, for example, what he thought at the time but not what he did, since you see that happening. He also makes oblique references to the ultimate consequence, in later years, of the action. This gives the script an added dimension of a life elapsed, and not just an isolated slice of time. The use of a narrator is a very special art and can be disastrous in a film. It can also, if properly used, add tremendously. It is particularly effective for a film to be shown on the home screen, which gets us right back to the old question of the difference between big-screen movies and TV.

When the film was finally finished, in the can, and we all went our separate ways, something happened to all of us that probably happens to all actors who involve themselves in something about which they care deeply. Films have a life of their own, and they send off sparks of that life into the participants. There will always be a little of Ralph now in David Elliot. Jim Broderick will forever carry around a bit of the Old Man in his soul. Tobi will be more Daphneish than ever, and Bill Lampley has been changed subtly since his meeting with Flick, while there is no doubt that Roberta Wallach, actually a lovely and sensitive girl, knows the dark side of the moon, which Wanda Hickey saw so clearly.

The entire film was shot in sixteen actual working days. Since we had a limited budget and every day had to count, the pre-shoot planning was as extensive and complete as we could make it. Every day's shooting was carefully planned out, practically minute by minute and for that reason things had to work the first time. We were lucky. For the most part, nothing went wrong, and only in rare, minor instances did we have to alter a day's planning because of unforeseen problems. Nothing is as conducive to efficiency as a lack of ready money.

The film was finally aired December 23, 1976, over the entire PBS network of more than two hundred stations. It subsequently won a Television Critics Circle Award nomination for "Best Achievement in Comedy" and "Best Achievement in Comedy Writing," and James Broderick, who played the Old Man was nominated for "Best Comedy Performance" for the 1976 televi-

scene involving Flick, Schwartz, and Ralph at the punch bowl. In the white heat of excitement, it took maybe five minutes. The actors loved it and it turned out to be one of the best scenes in the whole Prom sequence.

In line with that technique, I always make it a point to write, in fact rewrite, scenes after the production has been *cast* and they begin work. Actors, after all, are not the characters that the writer originally visualized. I write dialogue for the characters I see in my mind, but when they appear in the flesh—James Broderick, David Elliot—and begin to speak, they don't speak the way the people in my mind did. Their voices are somehow different; their bodies move differently, so I carefully bend and twist the dialogue to suit them, always making sure that the scene's meaning and thrust and the essential character of the fictional people are never lost. This is probably the most difficult aspect of converting previously published material, i.e., a novel, into filmic terms. As a result of this technique, it was almost unanimously agreed by people who saw the film and who had read *Wanda Hickey* that the casting and acting were almost flawless. In actuality, I really cheated, I suppose, by carefully editing the published characters to fit the abilities and the assets of the actual actors.

In addition, certain performers gave me ideas for new aspects of their characters and I wrote additional scenes for them right on the set. During the shooting, Flick (William Lampley) emerged as such a strong character that his role changed drastically from the original unpublished script to the final version. In short, you have to work with what you've got and not what you wish you had.

Admittedly, the creation of *The Phantom of the Open Hearth* was an exception to the rule of conventional TV or film production. Barbara Schultz, executive producer of the "Visions" series, not only encouraged us at every turn but gave us a totally free hand, something most writers only dream about.

There's one technical note that should be explained, and that is the very difficult role of the Narrator in the script. The Narrator is actually the voice of Ralph, grown up, but at the same time he is somehow mysteriously in communication with the viewer. The viewer then becomes the second half of a dialogue

flair whatsoever. The lights were too high, the band was playing something that sounded as though they were performing for a 1915 burlesque show, and it wasn't about to be much of a dream sequence.

I exploded. There were harsh, profane words exchanged. Actors cowered in corners. Rapidly my reputation as a Nice Guy went down the tube, and I was unmasked for the sonovabitch that I really am. All the while, money was ticking off the big Movieland taxi meter that drains the blood out of the American economy. Nevertheless, I was not going to allow the scene to be shot that way, since it was the key scene of the whole damn film, even if I had to hurl myself in front of the cameras every time they started whirring.

Ultimately the lights were lowered somewhat, the band stopped playing "Yankee Doodle Dandy" or whatever the hell they were blowing, Daphne's hairdresser allowed her hair to float romantically about her shoulders. Even then it wasn't exactly right, as far as I was concerned. I demanded a hand-held camera to be used so that close-ups, out-of-focus and otherwise, of Daphne floating alone around the dance floor, alone amid a sea of blurred faces could be shot. I sensed that they did it to humor me and to get the damn afternoon over with. Later, in the editing room, it was obvious that I had been right.

I use this illustration only to show that there are times when it is very difficult to get the precise effect that a writer envisions in a scene when he is creating it in his mind. After all, the writer can only put words on paper, and many scenes in *The Phantom of the Open Hearth* are not made of words but of mood.

The Prom scene is a great example of another technique I use in writing. I believe in always using what is actually available or what shows up accidentally during production, incorporating it into the script as much as possible. When I walked into the ballroom where the Prom was being held, I took one look at the gorgeously garish punch bowl that had been set up and I knew that it had to have a scene all its own. In addition, I also felt that the Dance sequence needed, dramatically, a break for the three principal male characters to meet and comment on what is going on. While shooting was progressing on the first half of the dance, I rushed into the next room and wrote a complete

script, after which the star, through his agent and two lawyers, rewrites his role to suit his public image. And way down at the end of the line, the poor film editor tries to make a magnificent soufflé out of what is basically boardinghouse hash. The true forgotten man is the one who wrote the novel that the whole teetery structure was originally based upon. He more often than not winds up suing the lot to have his name removed from the credits, if they've even deigned to give him one in the first place.

In truth, many of the truly great films have been written, produced, acted, scored, and often even edited by one man. Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, Woody Allen's *Bananas*. The list goes on. In fact, Allen put it well when he said recently something to the effect that he writes, directs and acts in his own films because Comedy is so personal that he *has* to do it all to get the laughs that he knows are there. He's right. It is the only way that I find I can work. Fred Barzyk and I have worked together for fifteen years. He respects my control of Humor while I certainly respect his command of the technical side of production. Together, we work as one man. Leigh Brown, on the other hand, has worked with me for the same length of time and can sit back with a cool eye and see just when a scene or a line was played better, and why it missed. And there is no one better than Olivia Tappan at actually assembling the many various nuts-and-bolts of a production. Admittedly, this is a rare combination but I had to mention it here to answer whatever questions there may be about why we were able to convey so totally the essence and the spirit of *Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories and Other Disasters* to the screen.

There were some cataclysmic moments. For example, during the actual filming of the Prom, Tobi Pilavin in the role of Daphne Bigelow showed up with a completely repellent hairdo that gave her all the charm of a spinster librarian going out for a big night at the Roseland Ballroom. This was completely off-kilter with the way I had visualized Daphne in the scene. The scene was written as a very impressionistic, surreal, almost dreamlike sonata punctuated with occasional blasts of cruel reality, i.e., Wanda's leering orchid, Ralph's sweaty back. For some reason everyone seemed to be about to film this sequence as a straight film of A Dance in progress; realistically, and with no

asked me one day about the future lives of his character and his friends. Since they were playing their roles beautifully, I answered, "They make another smash film and get rich and famous." He laughed and went back to combing his hair, which he did incessantly. Actually, in the novel *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*, Schwartz is killed in action flying a fighter plane. That's just the sort of thing you don't tell an actor about his character or that of one of his fictional friends. If you did, it would be inevitable that a hint of that tragic melancholy that actors love to play, those sad sweet smiles, would creep in, and forget the comedy. I did not tell Barbara Bolton, who played the mother, about her film husband's future peccadilloes, for the same reason.

Since this was a comedy, director Fred Barzyk and I worked together very closely on every scene. My humor is not the one-line insult-joke style of, say, *Rhoda* or *M*A*S*H* but rather humor that arises out of inflection, a character's attitude, the predicament he's in, and the constant struggle to remain afloat in a sea of petty disasters. Before each scene I would read the scene over in privacy with the director, reading line for line how each line should sound and even working with Fred on the visual humor, such as the episode of the tangled light cords during the Lady's Leg Lamp scene. Visual humor of that sort is almost entirely dependent on timing and meticulous editing and intercutting.

Later, in the cutting room, the three of us—Fred Barzyk, myself, and Dick Bartlett, as well as our associate producers Leigh Brown and Olivia Tappan—worked on these visual moments for hours. A film editor with a sense of humor is not only a plus in creating a comedy, but an absolute necessity. Bartlett's inspired use of the slowly moving empty swing when Ralph mentally gives up his dreams of glory and invites Wanda to the Prom was an editor's triumph.

I've always felt that most films fail to have a really solid core because there is no real single mind or will at work. The writer writes his script and is usually told politely to leave the premises. The director then proceeds to write *his* script, usually on top of and around the first script. Then the producer, with a bellow of rage and through a barrage of memos, proceeds to write *his*

JIM

Good grief!

(He was obviously agitated.)

ME

He just ain't your average TV Daddy.

JIM

What's that got to do with the Twenty Dollar scene?

ME

Well, you think about it.

Jim went back to work and did the scene beautifully, very much sharper and more to the point than the way he had been playing it. There was suddenly an underlying hint of irony and even a little condescending savagery which had not been in the earlier run-throughs. The father in the script is, of course, fictional, but when I write, as well as when I perform, I carefully create in my mind a complete life history of the character I am creating or playing. It is a fact that we all are what we are at all times, which sounds like one of those Gertrude Stein non sequiturs until you examine it carefully. What I mean is, the father who gave Ralph twenty dollars on the night of the Prom was the same father who casually walked out on the family without regret a year later.

I've always been conscious of what seems to me a curious shallowness in most movie or TV characters. Does Archie Bunker ever leave Edith? No, not in TV land. It is only the young swingers who are allowed to divorce. Rhoda yes; Archie no; yet the divorce courts are crowded every day with people in their fifties and sixties who, after thirty years of marriage, are splitting because of blond stenographers and usually as the culmination of endless affairs. In fact, when I told Jim later that the Old Man was having an affair even during the period covered by the script, he made no comment, but I could see that it changed significantly his interpretation of the role.

On the other hand, there are some things you should never tell an actor about his character. For example, David Elliot (Ralph)

ME

I mean, say, two years later.

JIM

Hmm. I don't see what you're driving at.

ME

Now don't get mad. I'm just asking a hypothetical question. What happens to the family, say, two years from now?

JIM

I suppose Ralph goes in the Army or something, and the Old Man gets older, and maybe more unhappy.

ME

You mean, not much happens. They just go on.

JIM

. . . yeah. I suppose so.

ME

Would it throw your character too far off the track if I told you about what happens to him?

JIM

What's all this got to do with the Twenty Dollar scene?

ME

Plenty. You want to know what happens to the Old Man a year later?

JIM

Go ahead. You're the writer.

ME

(studiously avoiding an obvious opening for a cheap shot)

Okay. One year, almost to the day after Ralph's Prom, in fact the week of Ralph's high school graduation, the Old Man comes home, announces he's leaving the family, and takes off for Palm Beach with a twenty-year-old stenographer with long blond hair and a Ford convertible. They never hear from him again.

no avail. This theme was much more dramatically underscored by having both events occur simultaneously and in two widely separated locations.

I can't speak for other writers, but in my own work I prefer never to editorialize on my characters, nor do I have my characters deliver sermons on the meaning of life; how sensitive they are, how all men must learn to love one another, etc. etc. which seems to be mandatory in what most critics call "the serious film." Is the mother happy with her lot, or unhappy? What about the father? Well, that's an interesting question. The father is no Archie Bunker, by any means. One afternoon when we were shooting a key scene, which I didn't feel was going right (it was in fact the moment when the father gives Ralph the twenty-dollar bill for his night at the Prom), I had a private discussion with James Broderick, the actor who played the father, about a specific and very pertinent point. I'll give you the scene the way we played it.

ME

Jim, why do you think he gives the kid that twenty-dollar bill?

JIM

Well, why not? He loves the kid, underneath it all, and figures he'd like to see him have a good time.

ME

Jim, do you think you'd mind if I asked you a question about this guy? I mean, it wouldn't break your concentration or anything, would it?

JIM

I suppose not. Go ahead.

ME

Well, what do you think happens to the father after the end of this script?

JIM

What do you mean?

wrong character can be the purest lead, especially if the writer believes he has just turned another deathless pearl of wit. In short, *use* a cliché; don't necessarily believe it.

The Steel Mill sequences, the actual scenes in the Open Hearth and including the ghostly shot of the Phantom itself, were in fact shot in a working steel mill, the Inland Steel Company at Indiana Harbor, Indiana, on the shores of Lake Michigan. Incidentally, the face of the Phantom is not a studio effect but is the actual eerie face that appears high up over the Open Hearth floor when a heat is tapped and the great gush of white molten steel roars out, throwing ghostly shadows over the girders and huge overhead cranes of the Open Hearth floor. I write this only because many people not familiar with the world of the steelworker have asked me about it and are always surprised to find that the superstition about the Phantom of the Open Hearth is a real thing among steelworkers, at least those fortunate enough to be around on the rare occasions when that ghostly face appears.

As to the actual writing of the script itself, many of the scenes in the script are very different from their counterparts in the novel, yet I feel that the essential mood and intent of the scenes remained intact. This was done in a number of ways. To get specific, the incident of the Gravy Boat Riot in the novel took place almost entirely in the mind of the mother. In fact, she never mentioned the riot at home, even after the police had broken it up. Obviously, a situation that takes place in a character's mind and is largely described secondhand by the narrator is not visual, even though the incident itself is highly so. Hence, I included Randy and the father in the final fiasco at the Orpheum to give the whole episode a feeling of completeness, of coming full circle.

Obviously, all of the time sequences were drastically altered. The riot was made to occur on the night of the Prom, which it certainly didn't in the book. The dramatic reasons for this time shift are obvious and evident and don't need much explanation, except to point out that the underlying theme of the script, the essentially commonplace, humdrum lives that the characters, and in fact most of humanity, live, are nonetheless not without their moments of high drama and Wagnerian disaster, all to basically

second floor (Type A house, or Archie Bunker model) or they have a door which for some reason is raised up so that the characters enter and step down into the living room. This is the Type B or Mary Tyler Moore model. In all my years of living I have never even so much as visited in a home that has either of these two curious attributes. A rich and famous TV producer said, "I always put that stairway in there. Y'gotta give characters a good entrance," when I mentioned this to him. In other words, he was saying that the set was designed for convenience and technical reasons and certainly not for realism.

When *Phantom* was shot, we decided to go a different route and went scouting throughout the suburbs of Boston for a representative home that would fit not only the script, literally, but the typically American lower-middle-class mood we wanted. We also were working toward a feeling of twentieth-century timelessness. In other words, surroundings that not only existed in the past but still exist today and will continue to exist probably well into the next century, neither old-fashioned nor aggressively contemporary, and certainly not Archie Bunker kitchy. We avoided at all costs the kind of in-joke knee-slapper that some set designers seem to go for; the grotesque thirties lamp, the ugly forties dress line and the inevitable fifties leather jacket. We studiously side-stepped all the obvious TV and film symbols which constantly seem to pass for atmosphere on the screen, the sort of thing that completely destroyed, at least for me, *The Great Gatsby*, the film starring Robert Redford which piled 1920s cliché upon cliché until the essential tragedy of *Gatsby* was buried amid Stutz Bearcats, white flannel slacks and striped blazers. For me, a visual cliché is even more offensive than the verbal variety.

I often use verbal clichés in my work simply because many people in life really *do* use them. In fact, that's why they are clichés, but I use them deliberately to underscore a certain type of character whose life is built on the aphorism, the memorized joke, and the pious solemn Home Motto style of wisdom. From time to time my narrator in the script will use a high-flown cliché, but he does so with underlying self-mockery and a kind of tongue-in-cheek comment on the life and times of his filmic friends. In fact, the cliché is a powerful weapon if used properly *as* a weapon. On the other hand, a cliché, in the mouth of the

lives, scuttle their innate sense of reality and even accept as a true manifestation of religion Charlton Heston, dressed in a phony bearskin rug, standing on top of a phony plastic mountain, clutching plastic stone tablets. Even his complexion, of garish nondenominational orange, seems real enough as you squat in the darkness chewing your Butterfinger bar, engulfed by the booming voices and thundering studio orchestra.

Have you ever noticed that the great epics never seem quite as monumental when they're shown on the home screen in prime time as they did back in the old Orpheum? There are very good reasons for this. Some of them are obvious. Your Zenith Chroma-color has a wee twenty-one-inch screen that, compared to the vast expanse of beaded material used at the Bijou, is about like a postage stamp glued to the posterior of a bull elephant. You are indeed peering at Armageddon through a very tiny window.

In addition to that obvious fact, watching TV does not erase your corporeal self the way reading or going to the movies does. For one thing, few people turn out all the lights at home to watch TV. Half the time somebody in the room is doing something entirely different. He's not watching at all; maybe reading a paper or yelling at some friend on the phone. How long has it been since you have seen anyone read the sports page at the Radio City Music Hall, accompanied by Dustin Hoffman being pursued by evil Nazis? No, the home screen has its own conventions and any writer who is seriously trying to make a statement via TV, at least in the dramatic film, had better understand them and use them to his own advantage.

In *The Phantom Of the Open Hearth*, I tried to combine the techniques of all three media; the novel, the film, and TV. For that reason, we chose to do this work on film rather than on magnetic tape and to shoot everything we could on actual location rather than in the more conventional TV studio setting. I have noticed, for one thing, and this is a very personal observation, that every home that TV characters inhabit looks almost exactly like every other TV home that other TV characters inhabit. Mary Tyler Moore's apartment is the mirror image of Bob Newhart's pad, while in its rough outlines at least, Redd Foxx's house looks like where Archie Bunker hangs his hat. They all seem to have a stairway running up the back wall to an unseen