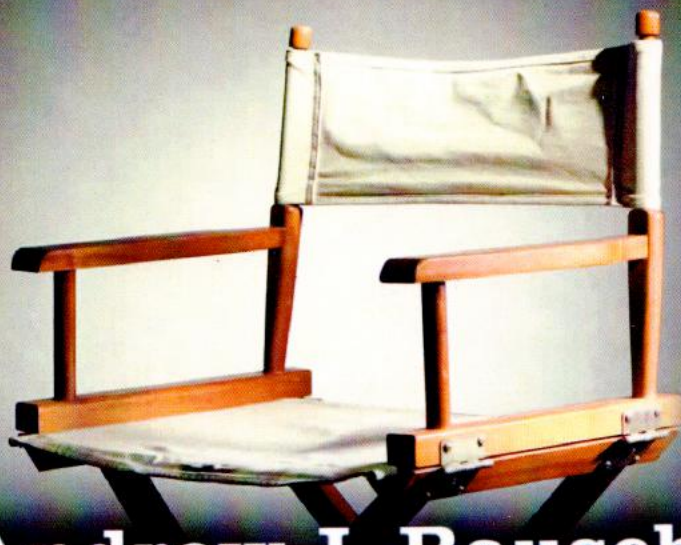


Fifty Filmmakers

Conversations with Directors
from Roger Avary to
Steven Zaillian



Andrew J. Rausch

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Foreword by **Max Allan Collins**

Alan Shapiro

Alan Shapiro directed his first amateur film at the age of twelve. While attending courses at New York University Film School, his first student film *Briefly ... Brian* (1978) garnered much praise, including winning Best Student Film at Cannes. Based on the promise he showed with that student film, Warner Bros. provided Shapiro with a scholarship and an apprenticeship under director Ken Russell on the set of *Altered States* (1980). In 1979, Shapiro directed the telefilm *Meeting Halfway*, featuring future filmmaker Keith Gordon.

Shapiro then had the (seemingly) good fortune of selling his original screenplay *Stonybrook* to Warner Bros., with himself attached as director. Then the unbelievable happened — Dustin Hoffman signed on to the project. This was, of course, every filmmaker's dream. However, the dream soon turned into a nightmare as Shapiro was asked to step down from the project, and a number of events (Hoffman's backing out being a major one) led to the project eventually being permanently shelved. When many other filmmakers would have given up, Shapiro climbed back on the proverbial horse and returned to work.

In 1984, Shapiro wrote and directed the Cable Ace Award-winning telefilm *Tiger Town* for Disney. He then served as producer on the time travel adventure *The Blue Yonder* (1985) before writing and directing another film for Disney. The heartfelt family film *The Christmas Star* (1986) told the story of an escaped convict (played by Edward Asner) who is befriended by neighborhood children who believe he's Santa Claus. Shapiro was then handpicked by acclaimed filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola to write and direct the two-hour pilot for his television series *The Outsiders*, which featured such up-and-coming actors as David Arquette, Michael Madsen, and Billy Bob Thornton.

In 1993, Shapiro officially arrived in Hollywood when he directed the hit thriller *The Crush*. The film, which marked the feature film debut of Shapiro's discovery, Alicia Silverstone, was nominated for three MTV Movie Awards. In 1996, Shapiro wrote and directed the big-budget film adaptation *Flipper*, starring Paul Hogan, Elijah Wood, and Isaac Hayes.

At the time of this writing Shapiro is in preproduction on a thriller entitled *The New Girl* (2006).

Favorite Films: *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), *City Lights* (1931), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), and *The 400 Blows* (1959).

ANDREW RAUSCH: *Early in your career you sold a spec script, Stonybrook, to Warner Bros., with yourself attached to direct Dustin Hoffman in the film. You must have been extremely overjoyed at the time.*

ALAN SHAPIRO: Yes, I was. It was like the Hollywood stairway to heaven. Little did I realize that I had in fact stepped onto the “down” elevator which continued its descent to the sub-basement level, where I was rudely asked to leave.

You were removed from the project, which then suffered a number of setbacks and was ultimately shelved. How did this horrifying experience change your perceptions of the business?

AS: It was a marvelous education. It was a crash course — in slow motion — in Development Hell and a system where insecure movie stars and their minions can — and do — ruin everything.

*When you discovered Alicia Silverstone for *The Crush*, did you have any idea how big she would become?*

AS: I didn't know, of course, what the future would hold for Alicia (or anything, for that matter), but as I watched her on the set and in dailies I was increasingly astonished at both her talent and my good fortune in casting her out of oblivion. I believed when the world at large saw her performance they would be similarly impressed.

*When *The Crush* was aired on television, her character's name was changed from Darian to Adrian, which I found unusual. Why was that?*

AS: That was per Warner Bros., and done entirely outside of my involvement. I thought it was weird, too. Astute observation!

*In his review of the film, Hal Hinson of *The Washington Post* calls *The Crush* an “invitation to child abuse.” Would you care to comment on that?*



Teen dream Adrienne Forrester (Alicia Silverstone) attempts to seduce older man Nick Eliot (Cary Elwes) in *The Crush* (Morgan Creek Productions, 1993).

AS: [Laughs] That may be one of the kinder reviews. One labeled me a “leering pedophile.” I was initially incredulous at the level of vitriol the movie incurred because it was always very tongue-in-cheek for me. Eventually I wore it as a badge of honor. To have successfully engendered so severe a response, I must have hit a few bullseyes.

Let’s talk about Flipper. There’s an old filmmaking adage that says you never make a film on water, with kids, or with animals. On that film you worked with all three. I understand that was a pretty rough shoot?

AS: The physical elements that were required on the production of *Flipper* contained every possible nightmare. I was a huge fan of Steven Spielberg and the making of *Jaws* [1975], the mythology of *Jaws*. So I knew all the great horror stories and I’d read every interview. I sort of called *Flipper* “*Jaws-lite*” because I started assembling the same team. First of all, I had Bill Butler as camera, and he shot *Jaws*. We were doing an animal water movie, in this case a yipping, happy animal. But it was the same elements— massive underwater shooting, on-the-water shooting, in-the-water shooting.... Then, lo and behold, my producer ends up being Sid Sheinberg, who was Spielberg’s mentor.

Some of the anecdotes about making the movie are sort of very similar to things you heard about *Jaws*, which was all the nightmares, like shooting on water.... You set a shot and then all of a sudden it just drifts away! Then, it’s an animal movie. And it’s a *smart* animal. Smart animals, as opposed to a dumb animal, are much more difficult to work with because you ask them to do this one trick and then they get bored and don’t want to do it anymore. They’ve done that and they’re ready to move on. And as we know about film, it requires a lot of repetition. Go from A to B or whatever it is. So the dolphins were impossible, and this was a magnet for environmental political maniacs. And I happen to be a real animal person, but it’s a lightning rod for that stuff. We were in the Bahamas for what turned out to be the worst hurricane of the century, so we were constantly getting killed by weather. It was one-hundred degrees with one-hundred-percent humidity *every* day. Since this was a totally exterior movie, we were outside from sun up to sun down. You had to wear space suits so you didn’t get third-degree sunburn.

With kids involved you have very limited shooting times. You’re in a third-world country. We were in the Bahamas, which was rugged in many respects. Just doing anything involved with water is really, really hard. Our schedule went from sixty days to eighty-something days. And everyday I thought I was going to be fired.

Luke Halpin, of the original television series Flipper, appears in the film. How did that come about?

AS: He was, like a lot of child actors, in a tragic downfall. He had some drug problems or whatever, and then he started working as a grip in the South Florida area. We were just talking in pre-production and somebody had mentioned that he was a grip. I said we should at least put him in the movie for sentimental reasons. He could probably use the work. He was thrilled. It was pretty emotional for him.

You also worked with Isaac Hayes on that film. What was he like to work with?

AS: Absolute sweetheart. One of my favorite moments— ever — was being on the set with Isaac and he was doing something I didn’t like and I wanted him do it differently, so I asked him to do it differently. And he looked at me and he goes, “Hey, you da man.” I thought, “Wow! Isaac Hayes is telling me that I’m the man. [Laughs] Okay. I could die today.”

One of the criticisms of Flipper was that it takes place in the Bahamas, yet there’s only one central black character in the film.



Fourteen-year-old Sandy Ricks (Elijah Wood) and his bohemian uncle, Porter (Paul Hogan), in Alan Shapiro's *Flipper* (Universal Pictures, 1996).

AS: Well, that's one more than any of the others were. It's funny. I mean, there were only so many central characters. There's the kid, the uncle, Paul Hogan, and then there's the love interest.... I mean, I felt pretty good about making him a black character. I didn't feel any pressure to, I just felt like I wanted to round it out a little. If it wasn't enough, I don't know.... There really weren't that many parts in that movie.

The one thing is that, when I took the job, this was a property. I didn't invent *Flipper*. There's only so much you can bring to it. I remember when I agreed to do it I said, "You know, the great thing about this is that it's *Flipper*, but the thing that sucks is also that it's *Flipper*." [Laughs] On the suck side, you know, what are you gonna do with *Flipper* that's gonna be really earth-shattering?

I mean, the one thing that I did do—and I couldn't believe I got it through—and had a blast writing it, was writing in this whole thing with the Hammerhead shark. This villain in the water for Flipper and this big fight that goes down and all this. Of course, the executives don't really know their heads from their butts, so they didn't really question it, and I just said, "Yeah, sure we can do that. Blah, blah, blah..." And then it comes to doing it and you're dealing with making that happen, which wasn't easy. We had to build this amazing animatronic shark and do digital stuff. So just as a filmmaker, it was kind of cool to get involved with all of that.

I've never been much of a Flipper fan, but I thought the film was done quite well. It was one of the few adaptations of old television series that I've felt that way about. Most of them are very poor in both concept and execution.

AS: For the record, I wasn't a *Flipper* fan either. I was doing another film at Universal, *Archie*, which was another rehash. I was doing something entirely different and they asked me if I would do *Flipper*. I resisted it and then sort of went into it. More and more it's getting hard to get a movie made, so if a big studio is saying, "Make this movie for us," you gotta do those things.

Like I said, there was a lot of cool stuff in it, just from a filmmaking view. I was very intrigued by doing *Jaws*-lite and living through some of the Spielberg mythology.

So anyway, that was sort of a long-winded way to say that it was never my life's dream to make *Flipper*! [Laughs]

Actually, there were some things I really liked about the movie. I don't dislike the film, it's just that it's—

AS: *Flipper*! [Laughs]

Right. It's just one of those things where you tend to have a predisposed idea about the film before you see it. If you don't like Flipper, you're not going to be overly excited about seeing the film.

AS: Oh, sure! And it's really easy to have an immediate defensive kind of cynicism about it like, "Oh, there's another stupid TV remake!" They're always doing these things. They make so much crap today. It's mostly crap. I call it "industrial waste." It's just feeding a big machine. There's so much greed. It's a really unfortunate time in the industry, I think. In my brief tenure in the business, which is twenty years, it has changed hugely.

What are some of the ways you've seen it change during that time?

AS: As the business has internationalized, more and more focus has gone on dumbing down the movies, if you will. They're much more interested in films that translate into multi-continentals, like action, sex, big stars. So the films become dumber and dumber and more expensive. That is a function of the business internationalizing. It's much more domestic now. Think about the movies from my point of view that really inspired me and changed my life: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or *Midnight Cowboy* [1969] or *Summer of '42* [1971]. Those wouldn't be made today, and that's really sad.

FILMOGRAPHY FOR ALAN SHAPIRO

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| 1. <i>Briefly...Brian</i> (1978) [TV] D | 6. <i>The Christmas Star</i> (1986) [TV] D, Sc, P |
| 2. <i>Meeting Halfway</i> (1979) [TV] D | 7. <i>Crossing the Mob</i> (1988) [TV] Sc |
| 3. <i>Tiger Town</i> (1983) [TV] D & Sc | 8. <i>The Outsiders</i> (1990) D |
| 4. <i>The House on Sorority Row</i> (1983) CA | 9. <i>The Crush</i> (1993) D & Sc |
| 5. <i>The Blue Yonder</i> (1985) [TV] P | 10. <i>Flipper</i> (1996) D & Sc |