

# Stonybrook

OPENING  
SEPTEMBER 1985

2/5/87  
Put project  
on HOLD!!  
(until further  
notice)



WARNER BROS.



A ~~WARNER BROS.~~ PRESENTATION STARRING ~~ALAN DATES,~~  
ADAM HOROVITZ, AND MARY STUART MASTERSON  
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY ALAN SHAPIRO PRODUCED BY ~~TONY BILL~~



**T**hey warned me. The psychiatrist my school sent me to referred to the film business as a "bad parent." The social worker said it was more like a "parent that eats its young." I don't know if either of them was right, but I was so amazed by what transpired in my attempt to get my first feature film out of my head and onto the screen that I figured if I didn't write it down, or exorcise it in some fashion, I ran the risk of becoming one of those people who all the neighbors thought was so nice before he went in and strafed the Burger King.

Like most young film nerds, I began making super-8 films at age thirteen, with a steady diet of claymation, pixelation, and takeoffs on *Mission: Impossible*. Eventually I got myself into New York University's undergraduate film program, where I completed my first production, *Briefly . . . Brian*, in 1977. It was nothing more than a day in the life of an eight-year-old boy in New York City, but it became quite a success, winning awards at the Cannes, Chicago, and Hong Kong film festivals and showing on PBS and at New York's Museum of Modern Art. What else could I do but start another, bigger production?

Bigger productions call for bigger money. Barely into my second student production, *Meeting Halfway*, I went broke and was forced to stop shooting. In fact, I was forced to stop going to

school. But someone was watching over me—someone named Mr. Warner Bros. The studio had seen *Briefly . . . Brian* and decided to pay my tuition for a term and send me to Hollywood, all expenses paid, to work as Ken Russell's apprentice on *Altered States*.

The job consisted of the delivery of doughnuts to the set each morning and the occasional rousing of Mr. Russell from his beer-induced naps. But just being there was a thrill, and I felt like a cat in a fish store. I soon took to wandering around the lot, trying to figure out just where I could glom the cash to finish my NYU extravaganza. I found my way to the office of Robert Shapiro (no relation, damn it), Warner's president of theatrical productions. "Get me Clint," I heard him instruct the secretary from his inner office. Then he noticed me standing there in my soiled painter's pants with a print of *Briefly . . . Brian* under my arm. "Who are you?" he said.

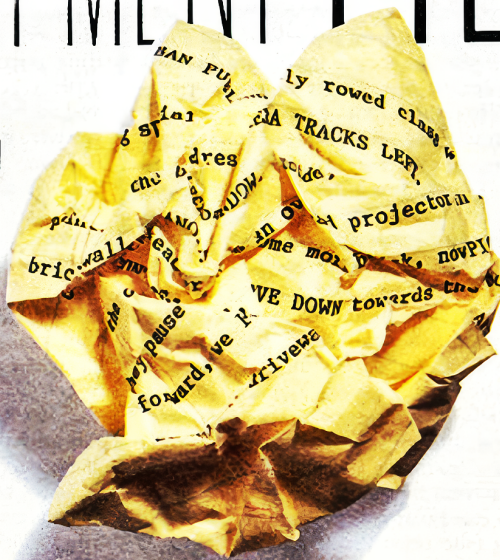
I nervously launched into my spiel and my humble request for \$10,000 to finish my film.

"Lemme look at *Brian*," he said. "If I like it, I'll give you the money." That seemed simple enough. "Thank you," I said. I handed him the print, turned, and walked into the wall.

The next day on the set, the assistant director handed me the phone. It was Bob Shapiro. He said he liked the film and to pick up the check from his secretary. I was stunned. "Holy shit," I thought. "Piece of cake!"

# IT CAME FROM DEVELOPMENT HELL

WHEN WARNER'S SAID  
MY FILM WAS A 'GO,'  
I WAS ECSTATIC.  
IF ONLY I HAD KNOWN...



BY  
ALAN SHAPIRO



*Altered States* wrapped, and I returned to New York and finished my opus. Then back to L.A. to personally deliver the print to "Uncle Bob."

This time it took a couple of weeks, but finally he called to say he loved it. Then I told him I had a terrific idea for a feature, and I'd like to tell him about it.

"How's tomorrow at three?" he said.

"I'll be there."

I had been toying with a story based on my "deportation" at age fifteen to a school for delinquent kids run by a crazy and wonderful headmaster who quite literally saved my life. A powerful memory and some casual notes were all I had. So I spent the remaining hours trying to make sense out of the story.

The next day I met my newfound agent for coffee in front of the studio a half hour before The Meeting. She advised me to avoid humiliation, call it off, and promise Uncle Bob the first 30 pages of the screenplay—when I'd written them—instead. "No dice," I said. "I'm gonna wing it."

Uncle Bob's office was typical of a studio head's: it sported the standard living-room-style meeting area, a wet bar, a full bath, and a desk so large it must have been built in the room.

"Have a seat," he said, closing the doors by remote control as I sank into a sea of overstuffed pillows. I figured there'd be some small talk, so I could formulate a game plan, but he sat in an armchair facing me and said, "So, let's hear it." I glanced at my agent and swallowed. "Well, it's about this kid . . ."

To this day I don't know what came out of my mouth for the ensuing five minutes. But when I finished, there was the longest silence I've ever known, which gave me the opportunity to think, "Okay, what else can I do with my life?" Then Uncle Bob turned to my agent and said, "Call business affairs. Thanks, guys." And we walked out.

"Oh, well," I said, crestfallen.

"Oh, well?" my agent exclaimed once we were out of earshot. "You got the deal!"

Everything seemed so easy. There I was, this 21-year-old gonif from Detroit. Was I trapped in a Budd Schulberg novel or what? There was even an article about me in *Variety*, for chrissakes! This was it! The Big Time!

How was I to know I had just embarked on a nightmarish roller-coaster ride to Development Deal Hell—just been handed an E ticket to Palookaville?

## A CHRONOLOGY

**Summer 1980.** I write the first draft in a barn in Massachusetts, beside the house where Nathaniel Hawthorne once lived. I thought the location would be lonely and artistic, but it's just lonely. Uncle Bob likes the script and says to get to work right away on a second draft. I move to L.A. and get a small pad in Venice.

**January 1981.** The second draft is completed, and Uncle Bob likes it even more. Now story editors and other VPs become involved in the meetings. Casting is discussed. I envision Alan Bates as the headmaster; Uncle Bob suggests Gene Hackman, whom I also like.

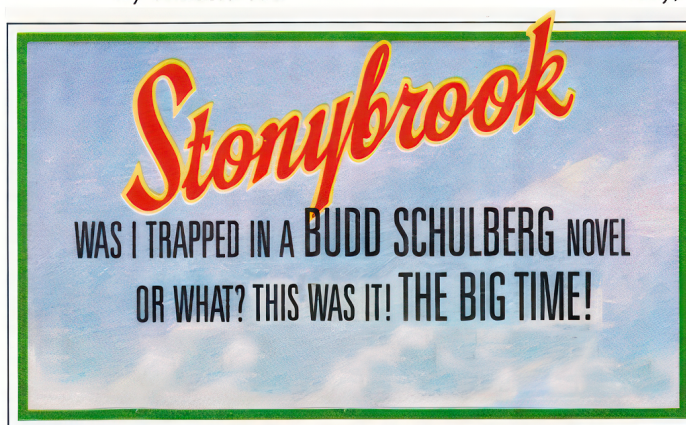
Later that day I take a shot and phone producer Tony Bill, who takes my call. I have admired him from afar for years, and by coincidence, he lives in the neighborhood. I ask if he'd like to read the script. He says to bring it over and he'll phone me at nine the next morning with his response. I think, "Yeah, sure."

**Nine the next morning.** Tony calls to say he loves it and wants to produce it. Uncle Bob is thrilled. I begin working on the third draft requested by Warner's. ("Make it funny!")

And the fourth. ("We're 70 percent!")

**Summer 1983.** After floating around for a while, I write and direct the Disney cable film *Tiger Town*, about an aging Detroit Tigers slugger, starring Roy Scheider.

**December 1983.** Uncle Bob leaves Warner's for "indie prod" status. The new regime isn't interested in the script (now titled *Stonybrook*). After a solid three years of writing, *Stonybrook* is officially put in turnaround. Suddenly the wind leaves my sails, and I feel alone, adrift, and terribly bummed out.



**January 1984.** The wind picks up: *Tiger Town* wins an Award for Cable Excellence for best cable film of the year. Tony Bill sees it and suggests we show it to Tri-Star, where he now has a production deal, and try to set up *Stonybrook* there.

**March 1984.** Tri-Star agrees to go forward. Tony and I are teamed with Gary Lucchesi, a former agent who is an executive at Tri-Star. He will prove to be our greatest friend and ally. Three more drafts of the script are written, each receiving a progressively better reaction, though I can't tell if the screenplay is getting better or worse. With the third Tri-Star draft—officially the seventh overall, and actually the eleventh—in hand, Lucchesi sends it to Gary Hendler, formerly Robert Redford's and Sydney Pollack's attorney and now Tri-Star's production prez, for green-lighting.

**November 1984.** Lucchesi, Tony, and I convene in Hendler's plush office. Hendler is friendly and soft-spoken and listens receptively to my approach to the picture. Tony and Lucchesi chime in for emphasis, and Hendler agrees to go forward with Alan Bates if we can do it for no more than \$6.5 million.

I clear my throat. "You mean, uh, make the movie?"

He nods.

"Thanks, Gary. I'm gonna give you a hell of a film," I calmly assure him. Fortunately the inside of my head is not audible, 'cause I'm screaming, "Oh my fucking God!"

**December 1984.** We immediately get to work preparing for open casting calls in Chicago, New York, and Boston. Coincidentally, Bates is doing a play in L.A., so I go to meet him.

**Christmas 1984.** In Chicago, more than 3,500 teenagers turn out for the casting call, almost creating a riot at our downtown hotel. In New York, it's more of the same, but here Lynn Stalmaster, the casting director, has made some appointments. One girl I fall totally in love with. She's unknown, so we tape her for the studio. Her name is Mary Stuart Masterson. Lynn then brings in playwright Israel Horovitz's son, who's more interested in playing music than in acting. I meet him and instantly know he's it. His name is Adam Horovitz, known today as one of the Beastie Boys.

In Boston we see another 3,000 kids, but between Horovitz and Masterson, I know we have the young leads covered. The only thing hanging is Alan Bates.

Then, as if by magic, the phone rings. It's Tony, calling from L.A. "Can you shoot Bates in six weeks instead of eight?" "Yeah, sure I can," I answer. "Then he's set—we're making our movie," Tony says. "Have some champagne."

**California, the next day.** The airport taxi drops me off at my apartment. I'm trying to get the key in the lock as the phone is ringing. It's Tony. Within the span of my Boston-L.A. flight, Bates has gotten cold feet and decided to pass. I'm stunned. "What do we do?" I ask Tony. "Talk him back into it," he responds. "Allay his fears. Be a director."

I locate Bates at his mother's house in Derbyshire, England. We talk only briefly, but it's clear he just needs reassurance. By the end of our chat, he's on the fence, and leaning my way. I ask when he'll be back in London: tomorrow.

(By coincidence, I'm familiar with Hampstead, the area he lives in.) "I'll meet you at the coffee shop on High Street at noon," I say.

I hang up. Think. I persuade Tony and Lucchesi that if I can just sit with Bates in person tomorrow, I'll have it clinched. Lucchesi asks his secretary to check the flights. There's a British Airways flight leaving in one hour that'll get me to Heathrow at eleven the next morning, which would get me to the coffee shop maybe twenty minutes late. "Get your ass moving," Lucchesi barks. "I'll have the ticket waiting for you."

I return to the airport, running like a madman. They're closing the door to the plane when I screech up to the gate, but I make it. Exhausted and out of breath, I sink into my seat.

Suddenly, the sealed door reopens to reveal a British Airways agent.

"Is there an Alan Shapiro on this flight?"

Confused, I raise my hand. "Yes?"

The agent speaks over the noise of the jets winding up. "A Mr. Bill called. He said the reason for your trip has been obviated. Do you still wish to travel?"

Everyone is staring at me. "I—I guess not," I reply, and leave the plane.

First pay phone in sight, I call Tony. "What happened?"

"Tri-Star nixed Bates."

"Whaddya mean? In eleven hours he's having bangers and eggs on High Street."

"Forget it, Al. That's yesterday's coffee."



They're working out the deal right now. Dustin Hoffman's doing the picture."

Then I remember—months ago, on a whim, I sent Dustin Hoffman the script, never dreaming I'd get a response. Tony tells me to go to New York, where Hoffman is shooting *Death of a Salesman*. Hoffman wants to meet me.

My despair gives way to a tidal wave of, "This is it, my first feature, Dustin Hoffman, my favorite actor—*Midnight Cowboy*, *The Graduate*, *Stonybrook*!"

**New York.** Tony and I arrive at Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens and find our way to Hoffman's dressing room. There, swiveling around in his barber's chair to face us, is Willy Loman. It is startling. Some small talk is made, and then I follow Hoffman onto the set, where, between takes, we talk. "A part like this comes around once every ten years," he says of *Stonybrook*. He wants me to watch him work, get to know him. I spend the next few weeks hanging around the set and his West Side apartment, talking script, eating, screening movies.

I welcome his love of character, the stuff that excites and propels me as well. Embracing me as the living resource, he wants to know everything about the central character of the headmaster. I describe him as passionate, impulsive, irreverent, the rump-tail genius type—you know, shirttail always out, and when he bends over you see the crack of his ass. Primitive, yet totally endearing. Quickly it becomes clear to me why Dustin took to this character so—it is him! Crude, passionate, frightened, immensely talented, and for the most part infinitely likable.

Memorable moments: Standing in a circle on the set with Dustin, Arthur Miller, and John Malkovich. They're in a heated discussion about which take was best when Miller turns to me and asks if I've read the play. It is as if God has conspired the perfect moment of humiliation for me, for I haven't. I confess as much, then excuse myself, tiptoe to the bathroom, place my head in the toilet bowl, and flush.

Up at Dustin's with Elaine May, Warren Beatty, Murray Schisgal. They're all talking about this funny movie they're going to do in Morocco. Finally, May has to leave. She shakes my hand and says it was nice to meet me, then opens a door and walks into a closet.

Dustin announcing to the entire crew at the wrap of *Salesman* that his next picture will be *Stonybrook*, which I am directing and which he wants them all to work on. Applause from all.

**Two months later.** Dustin phones with good news, bad news: He loves me. He loves the script. BUT—he will do the movie only if we can agree on another director. And not to worry—he will protect me from the studio; without my blessing, he'll back out altogether.

That's right. He's too nervous about my first-time-director status.

I hang up and feel like throwing up. This is my baby. It's the life I lived and the story I slaved over. And I am a director first, writer second.

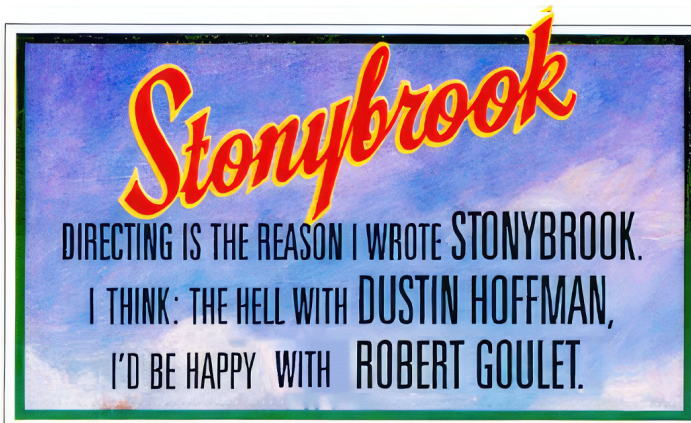
I ask Tony's advice, and he spoons out my first dose of Hollywood realism: Tri-Star, understandably, is salivating for a Dustin Hoffman vehicle, and now it's got one. If a little shit like

me gets in the way and doesn't play ball, the studio may not get its Dustin Hoffman movie, but the script may never see the light of day, either. Tri-Star owns it. I have two choices: sacrifice directing and see my movie get made, or risk sacrificing the whole thing.

It is one of my darkest hours. Directing is my priority, the reason I wrote *Stonybrook*. At this point I think, The hell with Dustin Hoffman, I'd be happy directing Robert Goulet.

**D day at Tri-Star.** Tony and I and our respective agents are led by a secretary to the conference room, where a gigantic round table surrounded by Tri-Star executives awaits us, not unlike the war room in *Dr. Strangelove*. And I am the guest of honor. Somehow my little script and I have become the only obstacle to a major announcement to the stockholders.

There is one order of business: to get me to agree to step aside. After the niceties and formalized roundtable discussion, the plan is for Tri-Star chairman and CEO Victor Kaufman and me to retire to Victor's office for a private chat. As



Victor holds the door for me to exit the room, I have that sinking feeling you get when you're being sent to the principal's office.

Victor pulls his chair close. If I agree to step aside, he offers, he'll give me a guaranteed "go movie" of my own creation to start when I please. He will also give me money. Lots of money. Enough to make winning the lottery redundant. And if it somehow doesn't work out with Dustin, Victor guarantees I will be the director with the subsequent cast.

I appreciate his offer. But as important as Dustin Hoffman is to him, I explain, my life and story is to me. Victor sits back and waits. My mind swirls with flashes of being fifteen and almost killing myself, writing about it in the barn in Massachusetts, the winding road from NYU's film school to Uncle Bob to celebrating in the Boston hotel to Dustin . . . and now, at last, sitting in Victor's office and finding out what my pain is worth on the open market.

I look up and say, "Okay." Victor smiles. The search for a new director commences.

Dustin and I go back and forth on various directors, but my heart isn't in it. A couple of months pass; we learn that Dustin is in Morocco "researching his next picture." When the Tri-Star executives hear this, they decide they don't want *Stonybrook* to become the next "next" Dustin Hoffman picture. Victor informs me that although I will forfeit the big payday, I am back on as the director. I can't help but be struck by the

irony of being ecstatic that Dustin Hoffman isn't doing my movie.

The big issue is cast. I am flattered to discover that practically every actor in town wants to do it; some, like Kevin Costner, are *begging* to do it. I meet with William Hurt, Kevin Kline, Jeff Bridges, Sidney Poitier, Dennis Hopper, Joe Mantegna, and Christopher Reeve and spend six months writing two drafts with Burt Reynolds, the only person Tri-Star and I can agree on. Burt is a pleasure, but somehow his deal falls apart in corporate bickering. This post-Dustin phase lasts for over a year before things grind to a halt.

Thirteen drafts and five years since I walked into Bob Shapiro's wall, *Stonybrook* is dead.

## EPILOGUE

During the following year, I write and direct a TV film for Disney and write a feature for Twentieth Century Fox called *Philly Boy*, which Orion picks up in turnaround. The producer, Robert Cort, and I are told we have a "blinking green light" (which until then I thought existed only in Boston) and are weeks away from shooting *Philly Boy* when the project is abruptly canceled. I am clearing out my office, commiserating with the production staff and telling them my *Stonybrook* tale of woe, when the phone rings.

It's Gary Lucchesi (remember, this is a year later). He tells me an Israeli investor has the dough to make *Stonybrook*. There's a meeting tomorrow with the guy, and can I make it?

**March 3, 1987.** I meet Jacob Kotzky, the investor, who seems completely genuine. Tri-Star has agreed to put up half the money, with Jacob coming up with the rest. Suddenly, just like that, we're back on. The only thing between us and a green light is the casting. I want James Woods, who has expressed interest.

**March 14, 1987.** I get word from Lucchesi: Tri-Star won't approve Woods. It will approve Gene Hackman, whom I've always liked for the role. We agree to talk to Hackman.

**March 27, 1987.** Fred Spektor, Hackman's agent, relates to me his support of the project for his client. The only thing Spektor's waiting for is an offer from Tri-Star. But Tri-Star says it must wait for Jacob's money to be placed in the bank. And Jacob says it will all happen by next Monday.

**Next Monday.** Nothing. Tuesday. Etc. Nothing occurs in the next three months, except weekly phone calls from Jacob to assure me it will all happen next Monday.

**July 4, 1987.** I give up the insanity and begin work on a new screenplay.

**August 26, 1987.** Jacob Kotzky calls from Tel Aviv, where, he explains in a thick Israeli accent, he is working on *Rambo III*. The following dialogue is guaranteed verbatim:

"Alan! Alan! It is Jacob! I can't stay on, but I wanted to tell you the good news. The Carolco people I am working for read the script and love it passionately. You hear me? Passionately! They told me, guaranteed, they finance the entire thing—if we can get Dustin Hoffman." ■

*Alan Shapiro is a writer-director living in New York.*