

UCLA

M A G A Z I N E

**PREMIER
ISSUE**

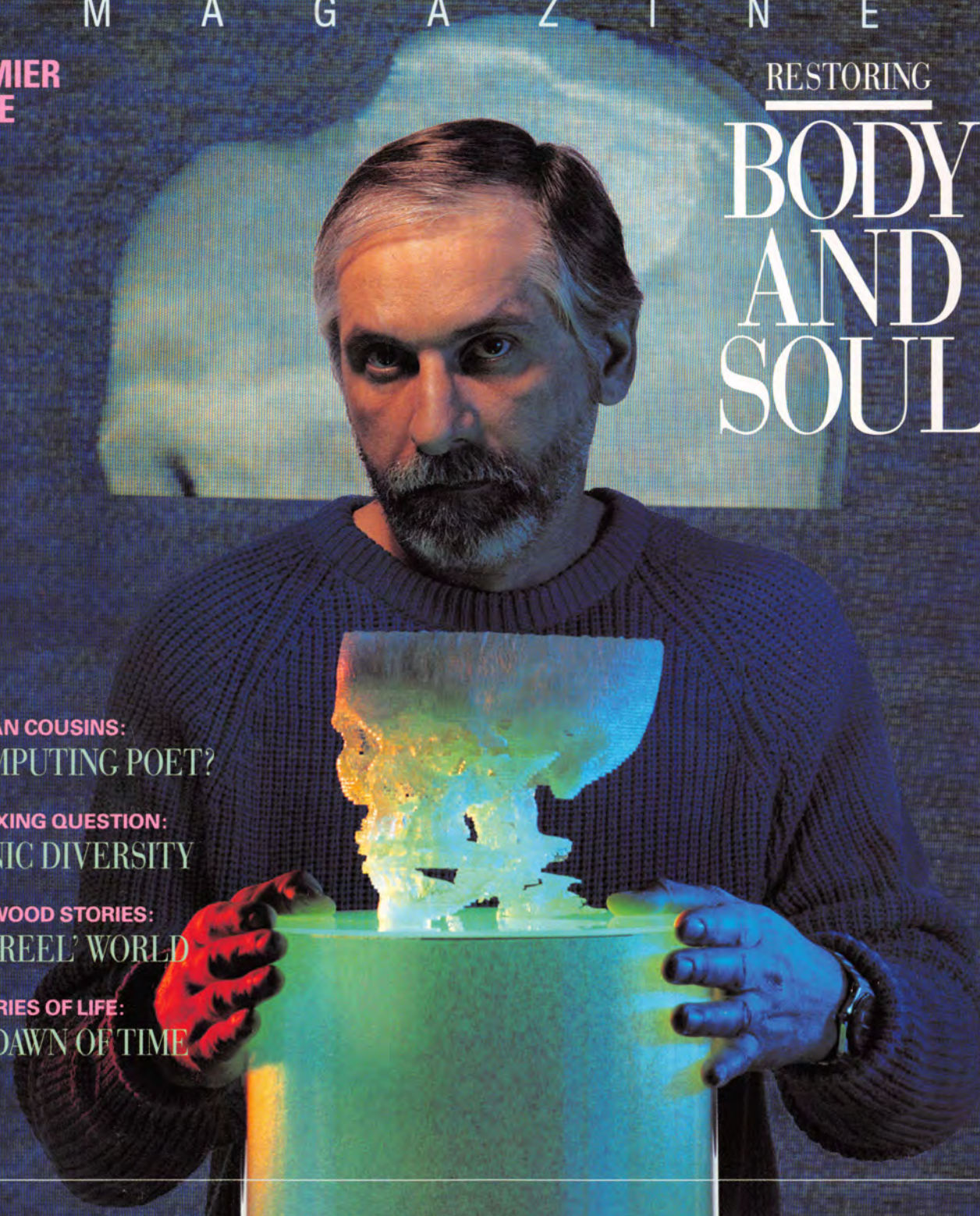
RESTORING
**BODY
AND
SOUL**

NORMAN COUSINS:
A COMPUTING POET?

THE VEXING QUESTION:
ETHNIC DIVERSITY

HOLLYWOOD STORIES:
THE 'REEL' WORLD

MYSTERIES OF LIFE:
THE DAWN OF TIME





BACKGROUND PHOTO—JANE O'NEAL. COURTESY OF ISLAND PICTURES.
MARK HARMEL.

Neal Jimenez
River's Edge

Hollywood Stories:

UCLA Students write
for the 'reel' world

***** by Pauline Worsham *****

Hollywood has long waved a magic wand over much of American life, from film and television, to advertising, politics, even religion. Increasingly, UCLA film students help provide this stardust, using their endless imaginations and their writing talents — sometimes before graduation — to create magic and money for the entertainment business.

During the last several years, films written by UCLA students have included *Stand and Deliver* by Tom Musca, *River's Edge* by Neal Jimenez, *The Principal* by Frank Deese, and *Highlander* by Greg Widen.

“The majority of students who enter the screenwriting program here find productive careers in the film and television

industries," says Richard Walter, chair of the screenwriting program. "We estimate that 55 to 60 percent of our graduates are working in the business." Although some very talented students can be working nearly full time, he adds, the careers of most don't shine until after graduation.

In a town where nearly everyone old enough to hold a pencil is an aspiring screenwriter, only 15 out of more than 200 applicants are accepted each year for a spot in the Master of Fine Arts screenwriting program, in which roughly 60 students are enrolled annually.

"The program forces you to work," says Jimenez '83, who wrote *River's Edge* in 10 weeks while enrolled at UCLA. "It's also a definite advantage that you are part of a community of writers." After completing the script, only the second one he had ever written, those community connections got his work noticed. "A fellow film student showed it to a producer, who then contacted Bob Hoffman, who's now my agent."

Greg Widen
Highlander

River's Edge is based on a true story about a group of high school students near Milpitas, a small town in California, who visit the corpse of a murdered schoolmate. The film holds special meaning for Jimenez because he felt a personal connection to the tale. "That story fascinated me because it reminded me of people I went to school with in Sacramento," he recalls. "Two of the characters, the 'good' girl and the ringleader, were based on people I knew."

Though Jimenez didn't strike it rich with the script, it became his "calling card" and led to other screenwriting assignments. Recently, he has been working on a remake of *The Blue Angel* for Madonna, and is writing a script called "For our Boys" for Bette Midler.

Greg Widen '81, M.F.A. '85, also points to the value of a kind of screenwriters' brat pack that has emerged over the last half dozen years.

"I formed a lot of very close friendships from film school that continue to this day," says Widen. He began his studies in 1979 and shortly thereafter wrote and sold his first screenplay, *Highlander*, a fantasy-adventure story set in the Scottish Highlands



BACKGROUND PHOTO COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY FOX.
MARK HARMEL.

Frank Deese
The Principal

and New York City.

"Such friends are useful in a business sense, but more important, in a personal sense, because they give you a support group — shoulders to cry on and people who understand what you're doing. Writing is extremely lonely and alienating."

Mickey Borofsky, vice president of Wizan Films, has read material written by Jimenez, Widen, Deese, and many other UCLA-trained screenwriters. He says their work is "as good, if not better, than work from other film schools around the country. Their commercial success is proof of that." He believes UCLA writers are well-grounded in the basics and mechanics of screenwriting.

Many screenwriting alumni credit their success to Walter and the other instructors in the program, all of whom are working screenwriters and members of the Writer's Guild of America.

"Richard Walter is a very careful editor," says Jimenez. "No one has gone over a script more carefully, page-for-page, than he has — even people in the industry. Richard is very good with dialogue."

Lewis R. Hunter, who with Walter comprises the creative teaching core of the program, also praises Professor Emeritus William Froug, creator of *The Twilight Zone* and the "godfather" of screenwriting at UCLA, for developing a program philosophy that Hollywood couldn't refuse. "I believe in writers teaching writers," says Froug. "Richard Walter was writing screenplay after screenplay and Lew Hunter was churning out TV-movie after TV-movie. Consequently, they understand the anxiety and struggle of writers, as well as the process."

In addition, the program stresses the Aristotelian principles of dramatic structure: beginning, middle, and end. "Our students first learn the tools of the trade," Froug explains. "Then it's their job to use them creatively."

Frank Deese '87, who has been applying the skills he gained for four years now, confirms that view. "The best thing I got from the screenwriting program was learning how to write screenplays as a very specific craft, something that a lot of other writers don't quite understand."

But he also says getting some practical experience helped too. "If there is any secret behind my getting into the industry, aside from the help I received in the program in getting my material read, it was working 'on spec' for a summer," he says. "The producers were honest with me and told me the project might or might not sell. But they also said if they liked it, they would push it. It worked for me."

Deese is so well established that he doesn't have to sell



BACKGROUND PHOTO—DICK JONES. COURTESY OF RCA/COLUMBIA PICTURES HOME VIDEO. MARK HARMIEL.

screenplays; he's hired in advance to write projects for producers. "If you're really, really lucky, you can work as a screenwriter and make a living at it," he says. "If you're even more lucky, your work actually reaches the screen or television (which is true of only one in 15 projects). If you're luckier still, you like your work. And if you're the luckiest, your work gets good reviews and makes some money for the people who hired you."

Agent Rema Bauer observes that UCLA's proximity to Hollywood is part of the reason writers from the program find work so readily, but says primarily it's the "track record" of UCLA's faculty in producing skilled writers. Today, some producers go straight to the screenwriting program for material, calling Walter constantly for leads to the most promising screenwriters in the program.

It was through one such inquiry that writer Deborah Amelon '82 got her start. She had graduated *magna cum laude* with a bachelor's degree in English and spent one year in the screenwriting program. She was the sole winner in 1983 of the prestigious Samuel Goldwyn Award, which is usually presented annually to three UC students for superior work in screen, television, or play writing. When Walter recommended her as one of several excellent candidates, she thought there was no chance she would get the assignment. "Well, I got the job, wrote the script, and it was actually made as a low-budget feature called *The Vals*," she says. "It taught me a lot very quickly."

Amelon was asked to stay on as associate producer. But she was intent on becoming a screenwriter. "I went back to UCLA and took all the screenwriting courses I could," she says. "I had just

started a film project for school when I got a writing assignment at CBS, and I've been working ever since."

The screenwriting program didn't always exude such quality. While other UCLA programs within the College of Fine Arts produced well-known graduates like Francis Ford Coppola '67, Paul Schrader '70, and the late Colin Higgins '70, in earlier years, UCLA screenwriting graduates were not sought after the way they are today. "At the time, a UCLA screenwriting credential didn't mean much," says Tom Musca '81, author of *Stand and Deliver*. "My last year in graduate school, for instance, I did something I felt was very ambitious. It was a two-hour television program shot like a feature film with a single camera. I wrote and directed it, and it won two or three awards. I got one call from an agent who was a relative nobody."

Both students and faculty conclude the screenwriting program's lesser stature was in part due to a more esoteric orientation. "There
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On the Way to the Top

by Jerry Jacobs

The wind whipped through the canyon at a furious pace. I could no longer feel my ears from the bitter cold, but I could hear the sounds of the creek flowing southward several feet in front of me, so I presumed they were still attached. I had gone without sleep for the last 22 hours and the thought of fording the 35 feet of freezing water was not a welcome one.

I took a deep breath and stepped into the black abyss. The cold raced through my body. I stifled a scream and the urge to retreat back to dry land. My second step was misplaced and my foot slipped on the moss which covered the unseen rock below. I instantly plunged two feet further into the raging waters as the two receptacles of hot, dark liquid I carried splashed onto my hands, scalding the frozen flesh. I let out a muted cry of anguish and fought to regain my balance and save what was left of the liquid cargo I carried. After all, that was my reason for being here. My personal safety had to come second.

My head jerked up at the sound of a twig snapping on the far shore. The face I had learned to loathe these past weeks in the wilderness stared at me with controlled anger. My wounded cry had been heard ahead and such was not to be tolerated. The antenna of his walkie-talkie pointed threateningly at me to stay where I was. My legs had lost all feeling by now, and I was somewhat surprised that

my body remained erect. I could have withdrawn to the bank behind me. . . yet I couldn't. I had spent the last two years training for this opportunity, and I could not — would not — blow it now. There was too much at stake. Although it couldn't have been more than a dozen seconds, it seemed like an eternity before the silence was shattered with a mighty cry that echoed through the trees. "CUT!"

"That's a print! Next setup." The first assistant director lowered his walkie-talkie and shouted across the water, "Hey Larry, you want to get the hell over here with that coffee!"

"It's Jerry," I corrected, through clenched teeth.

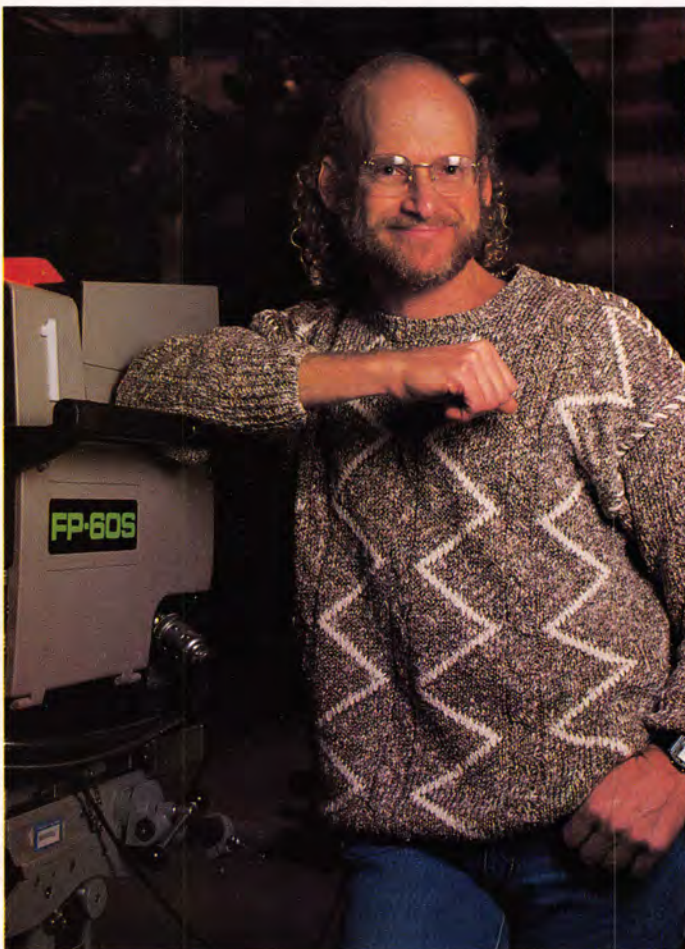
"I don't care if it's Betty. The director and I need some coffee. It's cold out here!"

"No sh --"

"Quiet please for rehearsal!" the second A.D. yelled, cutting me off. I handed the first A.D. his coffee. He gave me a snide look, then took a sip. "I asked for sugar, Barry! Is it that tough?"

"Jerry," I corrected and was then restrained by a gaffer and two prop guys.

Later, as I thumbed through the trades in search of further employment, I glanced up at my diploma hanging proudly on the wall. I had spent the last two-and-a-half years in film school. Not just any film school. But UCLA Film School! I was deserving of more respect. True, it had been hard coming to



GARY CONNER

Richard Walter

Film

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was a period," says Greg Widen, "when UCLA filmmakers and writers were not taken as seriously as they should have been, perhaps because the emphasis in the school, or Hollywood's perception of the school, was that it was not terribly commercial."

Over the last six years, the program's reputation in the community has improved because an earlier shift in its direction was recognized by the industry, according to Walter. "We're now seeing the results of the changes we made 12 years ago when we went back to the basics of screenwriting."

"We stopped taking the elitist and snobbish view of filmmaking and embraced the philosophy that the public and popular arts of film and television are *for* the public," he says. "It is not a sin to reach a lot of people and it is not a sin to make a lot of money. We can best serve the community that supports us by uplifting the mass taste. Our philosophy is that the best marketing strategy is good writing."

Yet, despite all the reflected glory of the last several years, art — not commercial success — is still the faculty's primary objective. "We want our students to be good," Hunter says. "Words like quality, vision, creation, and inspiration are the paramount goals of our program. We believe in developing minds that will plumb the depths of passion to bring forth a screen presentation that will illuminate some small or large dark corner of humanity."

Neither good teaching, the support of other writers, nor the magic spell of the program's name could have prepared Tom Musca for negative experiences in the industry, because business savvy can't be learned in school.

"I did a screenplay called *Little Nikita*," he recalls. "In order to attract certain financial and artistic individuals to the project, my script was given to a big name screenwriter to rework, allowing the producers to package and finance the film, which was budgeted at \$15 million. This is not atypical of what happens to beginning screenwriters."

"The more you understand about the business, the more you can manipulate it to your own means, and hopefully, make good art in the process."

Worsham, the former coordinator of communications for the College of Fine Arts, now lives in Hawaii.

Young

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the body does."

If Young's patience has eroded over the years, his level of confidence has remained high. "I'm confident now, but I believe I have more reason to be now than I had then," he says laughing. "My confidence level hasn't really changed, it's just better based."

Sue Young, too, has developed a new perspective over the years, "not only about my role as a chancellor's spouse," she says, "but about the general role of women in the work force."

Now the unofficial spokeswoman for a national group of spouses of university presidents, Mrs. Young says, "I'm not just a wife — I'm an unpaid professional." She was instrumental in convincing the University of California to adopt a new system of spouses' benefits in 1987, and spouses of the University President and of the nine campus chancellors are now eligible for a title, "Associate of the Chancellor," and benefits.

If Sue Young has achieved loftier goals than she recognized she had at the beginning, what of her husband's?

"When I became Chancellor 20 years ago," he states, "my one goal, and it has never been any different, was to move UCLA from a *very* good state university into the top rank of universities internationally. Every subsidiary decision gets measured against that ultimate goal."

Today he presides over a \$1.2 billion enterprise more populous and complex than many cities. In overall excellence, UCLA is regarded as one of America's most prestigious and influential public universities. To what extent is Young responsible for this success?

He answers modestly, giving credit to "campus leadership across the board, in the schools and colleges." Only when pressed does he admit, "I have to take the blame, so I guess I have to take some of the credit as well. I have selected some of the people that are in those positions. I encouraged them to go for the goal of being the best, and helped provide them with the resources to do so."

"I'd like to leave this place feeling that ethnic diversity on the UCLA campus was institutionalized, accepted, and beyond the controversy and conflict stage," Young says. "I'd like to see us finish off what we need in the way of additional physical resources. I want to see us move that last mile in providing the kind of social and academic milieu — residence halls, study space, and so forth — that will provide a superior quality of life for all of our students. Then I will feel that a major part of my goal has been satisfied."

Masler is the director of Public Affairs Publications.



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