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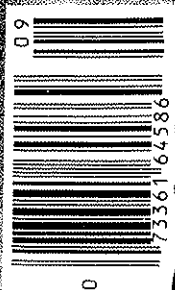
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WHAT IS
JOHN HUSTON
UP TO NOW?

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WAVE OF
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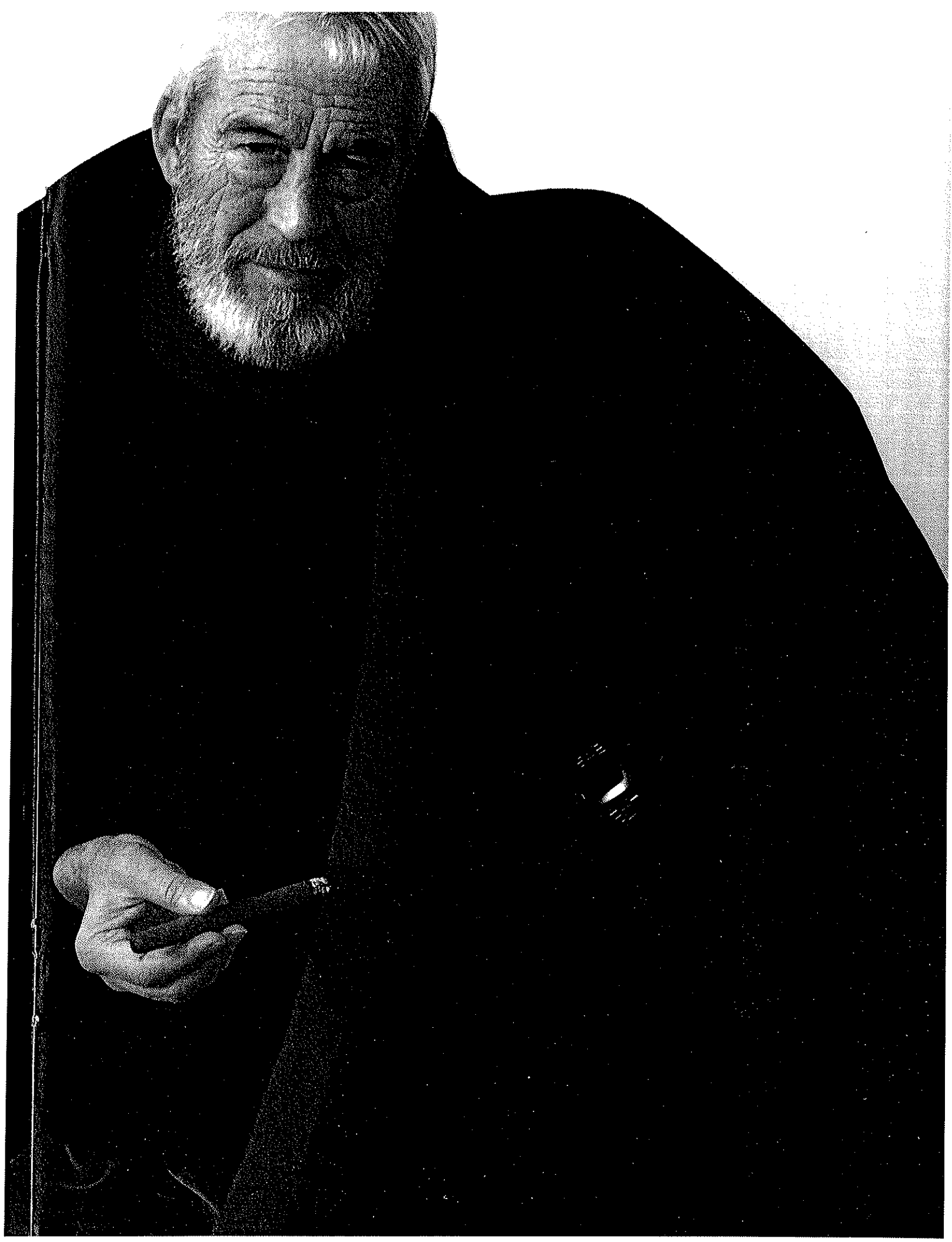
JOHN HUSTON: AT 74 NO FORMULAS

The critical success of *Wise Blood* has given second wind to the director's variegated career. Here Huston talks of work—past, present, and future.

Bernard Drew

In 1941, when John Huston was thirty-five, he was best known as the son of actor Walter Huston. Then came *The Maltese Falcon*, his first directed film. It turned out to be a masterpiece, and its success, both critical and popular, made Huston a star director. In fact, later Huston was able to add to his father's fame when he directed him in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Both father and son won Academy Awards.

Today John Huston is seventy-four and has directed thirty-four movies since *The Maltese Falcon*. His most recent film, *Wise Blood*, which he shot on a limited



LADYLIKE KATIE



When Katharine Hepburn first joined us on location for *The African Queen*, she was a little skeptical about the whole operation. She looked on me as a young, inexperienced director, and I could sense her reserve. I think Katie viewed most people—at least she did then—with considerable suspicion until they proved themselves. More important to the film, however, was the fact that her performance just wasn't right.

It had been—in my estimation—surely part of “Rosie’s” upbringing never to be rude to an inferior unless he deserved a proper reprimand. “Charlie Allnut” was doing nothing, in his own eyes, to offend her. He was just being himself. With this a gentlewoman could have no quarrel. But Rosie was behaving toward Charlie with no pretense of politeness. Indeed, she was treating him with open hostility. I made suggestions, but Katie ignored them. In fact, whatever I told her, she did just the opposite.

By the third day I had still made no headway with her, and we were about to get into scenes that were critical. So that evening I sent Katie a note, asking if we could have a talk at her place after dinner. I didn't have to ask, of course, but I wanted to introduce a certain note of seriousness to the occasion.

Katie sent back immediate agreement to my request, and I joined her that evening, sitting out on her veranda. She said, “Yes, John? What is it you want to talk about?”

I said, “Katie, I don't want this to become a discussion. Please listen to what I've got to say without comment and, after I'm all through, decide whether or not I'm right.”

Katie nodded. “Very well.”

I told her that her interpretation of Rosie was doing harm to the picture as well as hurting the character. That her behavior toward Charlie put her on a level with him, whereas she should consider Charlie so far beneath her that she treats him as a lady treats a servant. This, rather than rudeness, would put a real distance between them.

“A lady?” Katie said, as if I weren't aware that I happened to be addressing the real article. “What lady? Have you a particular lady in mind, John?”

I thought for a while. “Eleanor Roosevelt. Let her be your model. Good night, Katie.”

It worked; she understood what I was after. From that moment she was perfect.

—John Huston

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“I considered the Dashiell Hammett novel practically a screenplay, and we had a wonderful time making *The Maltese Falcon*, no sense of making a classic, of course.”

budget in Macon, Georgia, is every bit as fine in its own way as his first picture. Somewhere in between, he made such enduring films as *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The African Queen*, *Beat the Devil*, *Fat City*, *The Man Who Would Be King*, and one which is never revived and seems to be completely forgotten by everyone including Huston himself, but which I have always liked, *We Were Strangers*.

On a cold winter's day last December, on the shore of Lake Ontario in Toronto, Canada (where his father was born), Huston was shooting *Phobia*, his thirty-fifth film. *Phobia* deals with murders at a mental institution and stars Paul Michael Glaser as a psychiatrist treating convicted killers. Huston was busy directing on the grounds of an unused and weather-beaten asylum when I arrived, and I was told to please go into his camper and make myself comfortable.

When I enter Huston's camper, I see Michael and Kathy Fitzgerald, the young couple who produced *Wise Blood*. We met during the movie's showing at the New York Film Festival, and Michael is still glowing over the reviews—the best Huston has gotten in years.

Huston comes in now, whitebearded, but somehow still not patriarchal, shivering through the many layers of clothing he is wearing because of bronchitis (he is also suffering from emphysema). He is as macho as ever, though he is also an elegant man with impeccable manners, almost courtly.

He offers us all sherry—he had to give up his beloved twenty cigars a day, but he can still take a drink—and he takes one, then settles down, looking fondly at the Fitzgeralds. “They are quite an extraordinary couple,” he tells me, and they both blush as he goes on. “I didn't know a thing about them. A book by Flannery O'Connor was sent to me. Then someone called and said he was Michael Fitzgerald

and he wanted me to direct the screen version of the book and that he already had the money. Then he'd call and say that the money just wasn't there. This went on for a couple of years, and I became rather fond of him, paternal. I'd feel sorry for him and say, 'Don't devote the rest of your life to this,' and he'd say, 'I'm going to do it, and it's going to be a good picture.'

"Finally," Huston goes on, "he had the money, and we began the picture. There was nothing I wanted that he didn't go out and obtain, God knows from where. He spent money as if there were no limit. But no corners were ever cut, and the picture was brought in under budget. I must tell you that I'm intensely proud of it, as proud as of anything I've ever done."

The next morning there is no shooting, and I have been invited to the condominium Huston has leased on Lake Ontario. I meet Gladys Hill, his longtime amanuensis, who has written a number of his screenplays and who has just arrived to discuss something about the script of *Phobia*. After she leaves, he begins his story, skipping his sickly, book-filled childhood. "After I got out of school," he says, "I did a little boxing, then went to Mexico, where I was given an honorary commission in the army and trained horses for them. Then I got married, and I began writing because I didn't want to work. So I wrote some stories, and, of all things, they were published by H.L. Mencken in the *American Mercury*. I came to New York, got a job on the old *Graphic*, and turned out to be the world's worst reporter, absolutely no talent in that direction at all. I wrote a book, *Frankie and Johnny*, illustrated by Miguel Covarrubias. It was then that Herman Shumlin brought me out to Hollywood to work for Sam Goldwyn as a writer. But as soon as I came out there, Herman was fired, and that was the end of that job."

"This was in 1931," he recalls, "and Universal had a script they wanted dad to star in. I read it and saw that it would never be a good picture but it could be improved upon. So dad said, 'John, would you write out your suggestions,' which I did. The picture was called *A House Divided*, Paul Kohner was the producer—I was his first client when he became an agent, and I still am his client—and it was directed by Willie Wyler, who was then beginning his career."



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Walter and John Huston, when John first came to Hollywood.

"I worked for dad and Willie again in their next picture, *Law and Order*," he goes on, "and worked on *Murders in the Rue Morgue* with Bela Lugosi and Sidney Fox for Bob Florey and then—." Huston stops and says vaguely, "I was going through a bad streak so I went to Europe to try to extricate myself. I was in Europe through most of the thirties, drifting somewhat, then came to New York and drifted some more. I went back to Hollywood, but this time I had immediate acceptance there. At that point I wanted to write films more than anything else; writing was my only thought."

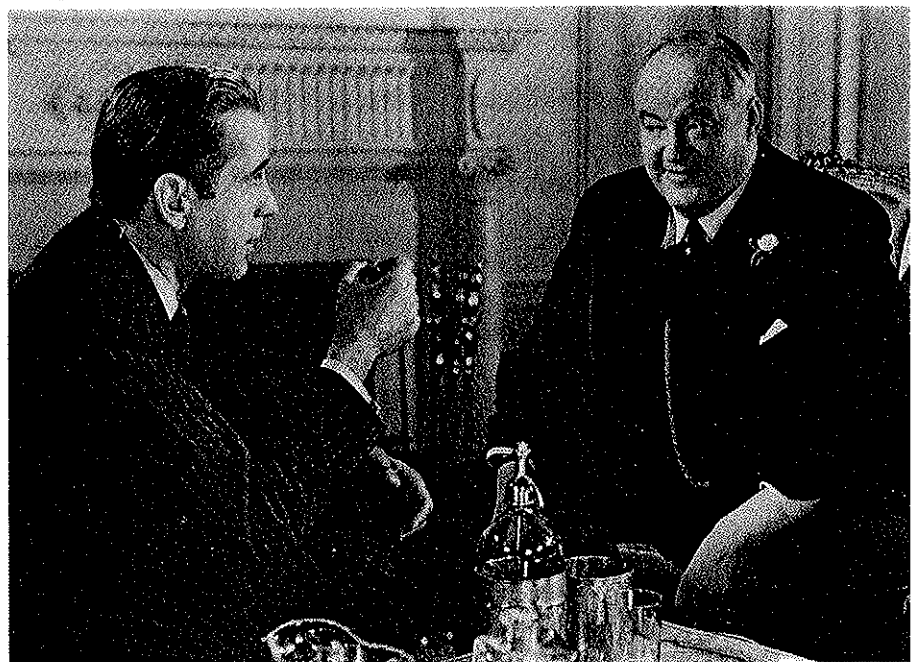
"I wrote *Jezebel*, *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse*, *Juarez*, which I wrote with Aeneas MacKenzie and Wolfgang Reinhardt, *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*, *High Sierra*, which I wrote with W.R. Burnett, and *Sergeant York*, which I wrote with

three other people, and then several scripts which weren't made until years later—*The Killers*, *The Stranger*, and *Three Strangers*."

"MacKenzie, Reinhardt, and I had spent about a year writing *Juarez*," he recalls, "and we wrote, I must say, a fine script. Hal Wallis said it was the finest he'd ever read. Then Paul Muni came into it and complained that he didn't have as many lines as Maximilian and Carlotta did, so he just tore the script apart and ruined it. I knew that if I'd been the director instead of William Dieterle, this wouldn't have happened. So I knew I was going to have to be responsible for the things I wrote, that that was the only way I could survive."

"So I had it put into my contract," he continues, "that if they took up my option as a writer at Warners, they'd have to allow me to direct a picture. They were delighted when I picked a property they already owned and had made twice before without success. That was *The Maltese Falcon*, of course, and I had a great champion in Henry Blanke, who produced *Juarez*. I want to tell you that Blanke and Hal Wallis were the best producers I ever encountered. Those two men were entirely responsible for the great years at Warners. Wallis was a very solid man who had a real imagination, though he would never declare himself on the side of culture or aesthetics. But he had a real appreciation of quality, and under him Blanke was able to do *Pasteur*, *Zola*,

Humphrey Bogart fences with Sydney Greenstreet in The Maltese Falcon.





A determined Bogart holds off Mexican bandits in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

and *Ehrlich*, which were a complete departure for that time.”

Returning to *The Maltese Falcon*, Huston says, “I considered the Hammett novel practically a screenplay, and we had a wonderful time making the movie, no sense of making a classic, of course. Everybody just had a lot of fun doing what they were doing and liking themselves doing it. Imagine assembling that cast today—Bogey, Mary Astor, Greenstreet and Lorre, Gladys George, and the rest. That was something that only the old studio system could supply. And remember that outside of Greenstreet, who made his movie debut in this, everyone else had had their shots. Even Bogart’s stock wasn’t that high at that time. He’d already done *High Sierra*, but Warners wanted me to use George Raft. He walked around with bodyguards; I didn’t want him, but I was prepared to deal with him. Then Raft happily decided that it wasn’t for him, so, fortunately, I was spared.”

“Perhaps there were some things that were wrong with the old studio system, but on the whole,” Huston goes on, “I think its death has been a great loss. Its troubles began with the antimonopoly ruling and subsequent divorce of its theaters from the companies that owned them. Now, theoretically, I was all for that, but as it happened, it was responsible

for the end of the studios.”

“While we were under contract,” he recalls, “our daily and future lives were assured, so we could afford to strive for quality. Nowadays, writers just want to finish their assignment and get on with the next one—it’s all part of the package deal. But before, writers were under contract at so much a week, and with each success their aspirations rose and so did their economic status. Virtue was more than amply rewarded, which it isn’t today. There is no way I could have made any of the movies I made through *The Asphalt Jungle* except under the studio system.”

Following *The Maltese Falcon*, Huston made *In This Our Life* with Bette Davis and Olivia de Havilland. This was a steaming portrait of the Deep South with Davis doing most of the steaming. Walter Huston accepted a cameo in it, just as he had done in *The Maltese Falcon*, to bring John luck, but the picture was not one of his son’s great successes. Huston next made *Across the Pacific*, again with Bogart, Astor, and Greenstreet. In the midst of filming, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and he was called into the army.

There is a story that may or may not be apocryphal that Huston received his orders just as he reached the climax of the movie, with Bogart being captured by the Japanese. Huston immediately wrote in a scene in which a dozen men faced Bogart with drawn guns while he

“My son John wants me to do this B. Traven story,” said Walter Huston. “It’s a good story and a wonderful part, but he wants me to play it without my teeth, and I’ll be darned if I’ll work without them.”

was tied to a chair. Huston then walked onto the set, and while everybody waited for him to get Bogart out of this precarious situation, Huston merely smiled and waved and said, “Good-bye, everybody, I’m off to the wars.”

It was just before the war began that Huston commenced his mild flirtation with the Broadway stage when he directed Walter Huston in *A Passenger to Bali*. “The truth is,” Huston says, “that I was never really interested in the theater, but dad asked me to direct this play—I had never done a play before—and it flopped. But then Howard Koch and I wrote *In Time To Come*, which was about Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations. Though it had a fairly respectable run and even won the drama critics award that year, would you believe it, I never even saw it.”

“Then in 1946, when I came out of the army,” he recalls, “I staged Sartre’s *No Exit* on Broadway with Annabella, Claude Dauphin, and Ruth Ford. *No Exit* introduced existentialism to the United States, and the critics were confounded by it. I think they thought it was just another French triangle play. In any case, it closed in four weeks, and I went back to Hollywood to prepare *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.”

This turned out to be Huston’s second masterpiece, although at least one member of the cast had his doubts about the project—his father. I remember his father telling me before the picture started, “My son John wants me to do this B. Traven story, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. It’s a good story and a wonderful part, but he wants me to play it without my teeth, and I’ll be darned if I work without them.” Fortunately, he changed his mind and gave one of the most penetrating performances of his life—and

won the Oscar for it.

Huston then turned his attention to *Key Largo*, based on Maxwell Anderson's play, which had failed on Broadway. He cast Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Edward G. Robinson, Claire Trevor, and Lionel Barrymore and made a film which was markedly different from the play. It was at this point that Huston, Bogart, Bacall, and many other important Hollywood figures began to busy themselves with politics. The McCarthy years were on their way in, and the Hollywood Ten stood accused of being Communists.

Huston still speaks of that period with passionate indignation. "The McCarthy years," he says, "weren't just a matter of censorship. Suddenly people were made into circus performers. If they didn't jump through hoops, they were disgraced, ruined, and destroyed. I had a great sense of shame at that time. Phil Dunne and I started the Committee for the First Amendment. Willie Wyler was in it, the Epstein brothers, and many others who flew to Washington to attend

"I don't even recognize a style in my work. If there's a style, it's to adapt myself to the material consistently, and as it changes in each film, so does the style."

the hearings. None of us were Communists.

"The only one on that flight who was, as it later turned out, was Sterling Hayden. After that, we were all branded, though McCarthy hadn't reached his height yet. I went on to make *We Were Strangers*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and then I left the country because I could not abide what McCarthy was doing to America. That

Sam Jaffe and Sterling Hayden steal a million in *The Asphalt Jungle*.



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had a lot to do with my not coming back here. Except for three or four pictures I made in the United States over the last thirty years, I've remained abroad. I did not want to come back into an atmosphere that was permeated with the stench of that dreadful man. In some ways, I trace the Nixon years with its disgrace to the McCarthy period."

"I made *The African Queen* in Africa and England," he recounts, "*Moulin Rouge* in France, *Beat the Devil* in Italy, and *Moby Dick* in England. *The African Queen* was designed simply as a great entertainment. I think it was the one picture Bogey made in which he was not playing himself but doing a characterization. He would constantly say to me, 'John, keep me on it, don't let me get off.' He proved that when he stopped being himself he could still be an actor. He was superb as a little man who was way over his head, not knowing what to do about it. He was totally befuddled before Katie Hepburn and life."

"Katie didn't know me when she agreed to be in the picture," he says, "but she'd heard stories about Bogey and me drinking and roistering all the time. We put on a great show for her, pretending to be drunk even if we weren't and writing dirty words on her mirror. So she set about to reform us. There's something of the reformer in Kate anyway, and wasn't she wonderful in the movie?"

I ask Huston what ever made him cast Sterling Hayden in the lead of *The Asphalt Jungle*, when Hayden was then simply known as the hunk of man who had married Madeleine Carroll. Huston laughs and replies, "I always found Sterling a very interesting man. I used him way before he began to blossom. He was known then for his physique rather than his talent. But physically, he looked the part of what they call a gorilla, the strong man in a robbery. In recent years, Sterling's personality has become richer. There is a kind of kingliness or priestliness about him now. I can see him conducting a pagan rite, his beard blowing in all directions." I ask him what he had seen in Bogart when he picked him to play Sam Spade. "I saw in him what audiences today see in him," he says. "He was not a man of great stature physically, but the camera saw something in him that we, and even he, didn't."

"I'm always surprised that so many good actors are like the characters they portray on the screen," he continues. "Take Clark Gable. He was very much

Continued on page 66

STALLING FOR TIME



Although I talked Bogie into buying the film rights to the thriller novel *Beat the Devil*, I didn't want to write the screenplay myself, so I gave it to Peter Viertel and Tony Veiller. They wrote a script which wasn't very good, then washed their hands of it. Before the script was finished, the picture was cast. Jennifer Jones and Peter Lorre had already been hired, and we were about ready to roll. When I arrived in Italy, I still didn't have a script or a scriptwriter. But it just so happened that Truman Capote was in Rome. I told him that I needed help badly and asked if he would give me a hand. Fortunately, he agreed, because we probably could never have made the picture without him.

We weren't going to have a chance to start writing until we reached Ravello, the little town south of Naples where we were going to shoot. I knew it was going to be nip and tuck. The money for the film was being put up by a conglomerate of backers that included Roberto Haggiag, the Wolf brothers, and Bogart himself.

In Rome I told Bogie that we were in a desperate situation. "We haven't got a script, and I don't know what the hell is going to come of this," I said. "It may be a disaster. In fact, it's got all the earmarks of a disaster."

Jack Clayton, now a fine director, was the production manager, and he was in our conspiracy to stall for time. We didn't want the company to know that the script wasn't ready, so Jack announced that I didn't want the actors to see their lines until just before we shot a scene. He explained that I was experimenting with a new technique, trying to encourage a more spontaneous approach to the material. But, in spite of his fast talk, the picture caught up with us.

There was a section written by Viertel and Veiller that just didn't work. I knew it was going to take time to fix it. In a desperate delaying action, I went down and staged a scene so elaborately that the carpenters had to remove "wild" walls and make all sorts of alterations. I figured it would take the crew at least half a day to get ready to shoot, plus rehearsal time. While they were preparing the set,

Truman and I went upstairs and wrote an entire new scene. That's how close it was.

Truman Capote was remarkable. I remember finding him one evening with his face swollen and lopsided—he had an impacted wisdom tooth. Although in considerable pain, he was still working. We called an ambulance. Truman asked for his purple Balmain shawl, one that Jennifer had given him. We wrapped him in it and saw him off. That same night new pages of script arrived from the hospital! Truman was all courage.

One night there was arm wrestling. Bogie and Truman were engaged, and it almost became a fight. It did, in fact, turn into a wrestling match. And Truman took Bogie! He pinned Bogie's shoulders to the floor and held him there. Truman's epicene comportment was downright deceptive! He was remarkably strong and had pit bulldog in him.

David Selznick visited the set from time to time. He had no connection with the picture except that his wife, Jennifer Jones, was in it. It didn't matter: When she signed a contract, David started his memorandums.

Throughout *Beat the Devil* I would get memorandums from him, mostly by cable, concerning production and recommendations for scenes, and on and on, ad infinitum. David numbered the pages of his cables. Some ran ten to twelve pages—or more. One day, after receiving a particularly long cable from David, I sent him a cable back. Page one answered various points he had made. I then omitted page two and jumped to page three. From then on I answered anything he asked me by replying: "Refer to page two my cable X date." I understand this drove him right up the wall. It was rough on the cable company, too, because David was out to find page two.

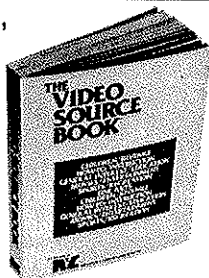
—John Huston

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HUSTON

from page 44

Gable offscreen. When I was directing him in *The Misfits*, I would see something he could do that would sharpen his performance, and I'd tell him. Now, he sought direction, really wanted it, but I saw that what he did by himself was much better than anything I could think of for him to do. He knew instinctively what was right and natural for him, though he didn't always trust it."

The next time I see Huston, it's the day before he is to be honored with a gala tribute by the Film Society of Lincoln Center. He is tanned and robust looking in his suite at the Pierre, happy and grateful for the honor he will be accorded. Paul Newman, Lauren Bacall, Richard Burton, and Eli Wallach will be among those giving him testimonials. I recall that Jack Nicholson, who has been living with Huston's daughter, Anjelica, for many years, once said that Huston was the only man in this business who has never had to make a comeback because he's always been up there. I think Nicholson is wrong. Huston has been down there more often than up. It's simply that when he's up, he's so spectacularly up that one forgets and forgives his previous downs. I still cannot believe that he made *The Barbarian and the Geisha*, *Sinful Davey*, or *The Mackintosh Man*.

"One of the biggest disappointments in my career was when the critics and public did not respond to *Moby Dick*," he admits. "It eventually paid for itself, but it wasn't a big financial success, and that bothered me. I've developed a philosophy across the years about failure. If you're going to be a professional about it, once you complete a picture, it's on its own. I love to hear that a picture is a success, and I regret when it's not, but by the time it's out, I'm on to something else, so I can't kill myself."

Returning to *Moby Dick*, Huston says, "They took it out on Gregory Peck, which I think was unfair, because I liked him and I liked the film. Still do. I just saw it again the other day. As a matter of fact, I think that Greg is quite remarkable. He's not the ranting, raving psychotic of the book, nor the John Barrymore version of Ahab, which colored it forever for audiences."

Huston went on to make a series of forgettables, among them *The Roots of*

Heaven, a film Huston calls "one of the most unfortunate pictures I ever made. I don't think it began to reach its potential, and I hold myself fully responsible for it. I hold others to account for several of my failures, but in the case of *Roots*, *A Walk With Love and Death*, and *The Kremlin Letter*, I was given every freedom. I chose those stories, helped write them, directed them, and virtually produced them, and they didn't turn out well. I feel responsible to the principals, in this case, Dick Zanuck and David Brown—and Darryl Zanuck, I owe a great deal to him. He was a decent man, full of moxie, and he wore his Boy Scout badge at the first dragon or sign of trouble. When I'd apologize to him for one of my failures, he'd say, 'Don't take all the credit. I gave you the go-ahead, didn't I?' A fine man."

I ask Huston now about his problems with Montgomery Clift. Both of Clift's biographers have painted Huston as a villain who tortured Clift all through the making of *Freud*. Huston replies immediately, eyes flashing, "I found him to be not a pleasant man," he says. "I shied away from him. He was, or had been, a wonderful actor, but I got the remnants of him, not the man himself. He was pretty shredded by the time he came to me. The troubles I had with him were not his fault. He was just not capable any more. The accident to his face had done great interior damage to him. He had been very good in *The Misfits*, but he had very few lines in it, mostly colloquialisms, and I was taken in by his performance and thought he could do *Freud*, but he couldn't."

Huston then turned to an eclectic set of films—including *The Night of the Iguana*, *Casino Royale*, and *Reflections in a Golden Eye*—but in 1972 he was back again in peak form with *Fat City*. "That was about an aspect of American life that I knew quite well at one time," he says. "Not the skid row aspect but the boxing world, and I think it turned out well." So did *The Man Who Would Be King*, which was his best sheer entertainment since *The African Queen*. "I wanted to make that thirty years ago with Bogart and Gable," he recalls, "but it didn't happen, and it went on not happening until all this time later."

I ask him how, as a director, he works with actors, and he replies, "I have no special system, but I direct as little as possible always. I don't want an actor to give my performance. I want to get as much as I can out of him. I'll go

