

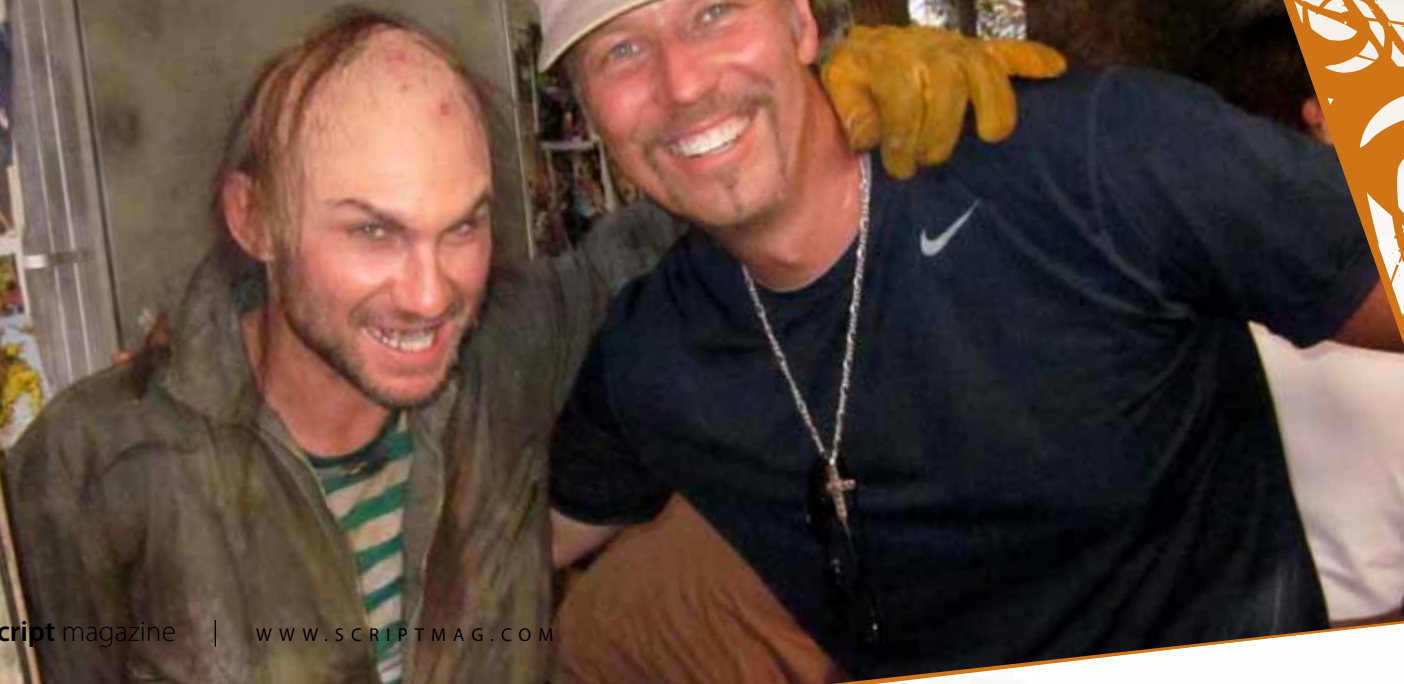
Creative Rites

TAKING THE JOB OF WRITER-DIRECTOR

Inspiration. Nothing brings it more readily than desperation. Earlier that week, an arrogant producer on a work-for-hire script gig had called me a typist. So here I was, walking through a derelict old greenhouse on an abandoned rose ranch built in 1917. It was scary, dark, and full of towering weeds that looked like demons.

As I shined my flashlight across the decaying glass architecture and miles of rusty pipes, I couldn't stop thinking how I needed to make a change. For years I had been aching to transition to the coolest job in all of Hollywood—the writer-director. But my previous efforts had failed. I was resigned to taking these money jobs. Maybe I had become a typist.

Christian Slater (as Delgado) and writer-director Peter Iliff on the set of *Rites of Passage*



I was walking through the greenhouses with my good pal Rick Halsey from his Santa Barbara rustic beach cottage to the loading dock where a small office had an Internet connection. I found myself staring at two gigantic iron boilers, nearly a hundred years old and the size of ancient mastodons. A production designer couldn't dream this up. That's when the inspiration hit. Why not invent my dream job?

"Hey, Rick, wanna make a movie?"

"About what?"

"Uh, I dunno yet, but whatever we come up with, we do it right here."

Always the adventurer, Rick said, "Why not?" We shook hands, agreed to invest \$100,000 each, and I set out to raise the rest of the money. But we didn't have a script or even a story to tell yet. Ten months later, we began principal photography on *Rites of Passage*.

What is unique about our independent film is that the process started backward. Rick and I had to generate an original story and characters based on a specific location. The themes we would work with quickly became obvious.

Rick and I have been close pals since our years at UCSB. He is an environmental activist who runs the California Chaparral Institute. His rose ranch is a Chumash Indian sacred burial ground, thus Rick grew up loving anthropology and natural history. Last spring on a visit, we picked up UCSB's *The Daily Nexus*. The front page read "Take the Back Door to Unexpected Pleasure." This column was a "how to" for students on anal sex. This article got me thinking about today's college generation. A freshman applicant needs a 4.1 grade point average to gain admission into UCSB. Conversely, this top university is rated the number-six party school in the nation. From what we saw of our alma mater, life in the student beach town of Isla Vista—home of the infamous Halloween party on Del Playa—looked like the decline and fall of western civilization.

These kids are prescribed stimulants like Ritalin to concentrate, Xanax to relieve anxiety, Ambien to sleep, and anti-depressants to keep it together. Medical marijuana is an epidemic and a helluva lot stronger than the skunkweed we used to smoke. Isla Vista cops tell me every weekend paramedics rescue 10

to 20 alcohol-poisoned students from binge drinking, mostly girls. Rape is off the charts. Hookup sex is easy, no strings attached. Everyone's relationship status is posted on Facebook. The preferred way to express true feelings is through an electronic interface such as iChat or sending a text.

Rick and I realized that for most youth today, surviving the academic stress and the hardcore party scene is the only rites of passage they have in our culture which, unless you are Jewish, lacks any ceremony marking the change from adolescence to adulthood.

INT./EXT. APARTMENT LIVING ROOM/SUNDECK — DAY

Hungover NATHAN walks from his bedroom, surveying the party wreckage in the living room. The "Bong of the Gods" lies spilled by a comatose STUDENT on a sofa. Nathan steps out to the sundeck, finding HART on a stool, eating cereal, his shirt off. Nathan looks at a SCAR on Hart's muscular back.

NATHAN

What's it feel like getting shot?

HART

Knocks the wind outta you. But it got me discharged. Otherwise, I'd still be over there. Lots of us are forced to do three tours.

NATHAN

All through history, most cultures had a rite of passage ceremony to turn boys into men. You fought a war. Mine is shotgunning beers and trying to get laid and failing miserably.

HART

You want a bar mitzvah? What?

NATHAN

Sometimes I feel like I'm always going to be stuck, never knowing what I'm made of.

HART

What you think you want

isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Directing is a job Hollywood doesn't give away. You have to take it. And to do that, you need to be audacious and bold. You need a burning desire. A dream is nice, but it's nothing without a plan. I studied how my writer-director heroes had gotten their first movies made. One of the tricks of a low-budget movie is reducing company moves. Moving the crew from one location to another burns time and money. So we set out to "build" our screenplay around Rick's rose ranch, which offered a secluded beach, a rustic cottage, open fields, derelict greenhouses, industrial coolers, bungalows, and offices. We had to create a story that would make use of these ready-made sets, then add a week of shooting in Isla Vista to set up our characters.

Our business plan was to make a youth-oriented film. Steal a shameless genre template—sexy college kids arrive at isolated cottage only to discover bad juju out to do them harm. We threw in Rick's knowledge of the Chumash Indians who were wiped out by Spanish missionaries in Santa Barbara. Their shaman drank hallucinogenic tea from the Jimsonweed flower that still grows on the rose ranch today.

EXT. SECLUDED BEACH, BONFIRE — NIGHT

The glow of the bonfire is the only light on this secluded beach. Shirts are coming off as PROFESSOR NASH paints slashes and Chumash celestial images on everybody's skin. NATHAN holds up a ZIPLOCK with a ROOT inside.

NATHAN

Look what I've got. Let's walk back up and start the ceremony.

PROFESSOR NASH

Is that Jimsonweed?

NATHAN

Gonna do this right, aren't we? I've got a ceremonial bowl to sip from. We dug it up here.

PROFESSOR NASH

I can't allow students to do hallucinogenic drugs on my watch.

DANI

Nathan, I've known kids who ODeD and fucking died on that shit.

MOJO

(Mojo holds up a joint and sparks it.)
Go with what we know.
Hot-box in the brush hut, baby.

NATHAN

We gotta have the tea! This is exactly our problem. We've done away with rituals and ceremony. We just do whatever. On our own. Whenever.

DANI

Fuck the ritual, do you have any idea what that shit can do?

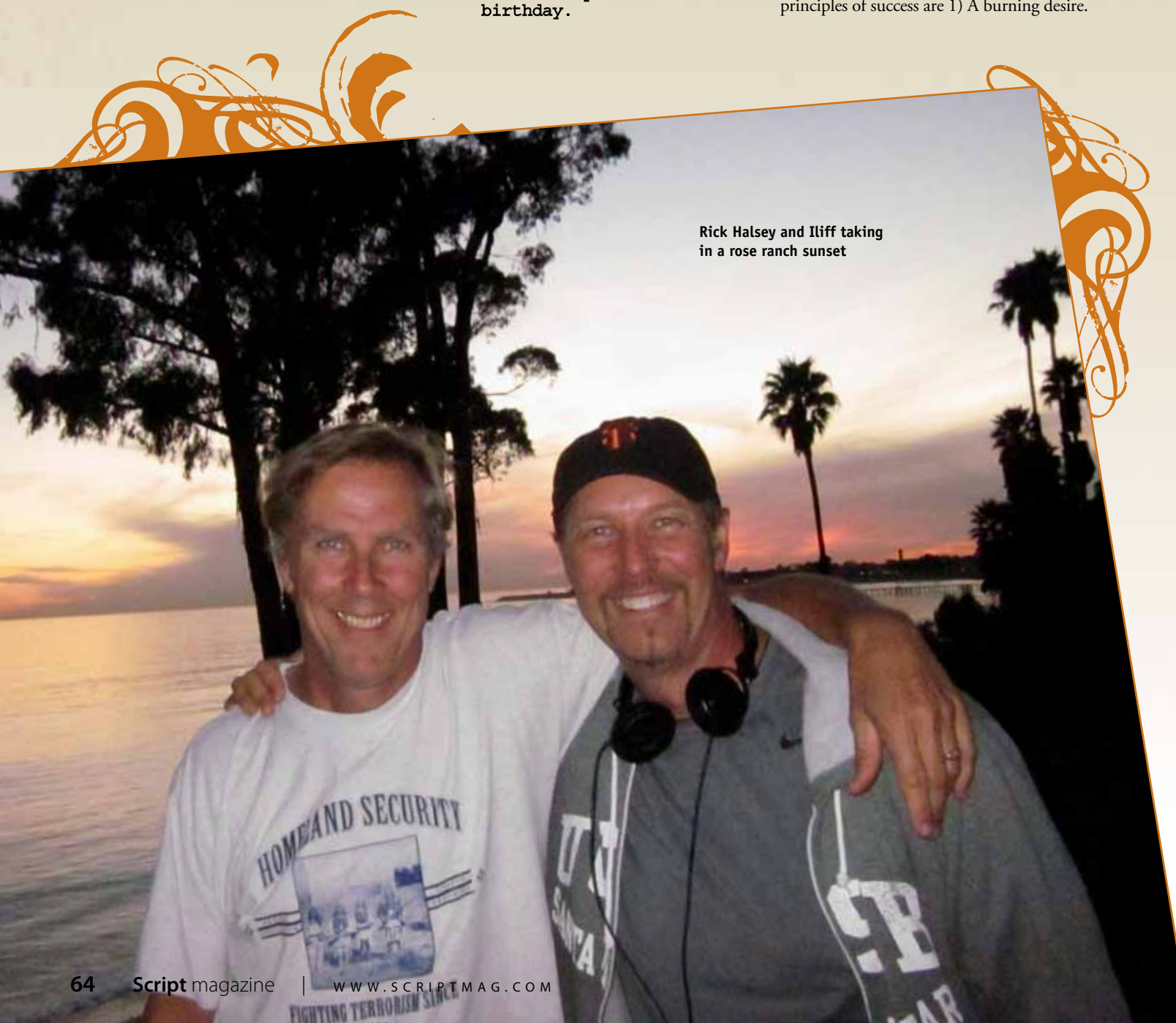
ROXANNE

You can always get wasted on your 21st birthday.

As I began working on the script, I made an iMovie on my Mac, visualizing the themes of our story. I needed this tool to begin raising money. I bought a video camera at Best Buy for \$800 bucks. I shot footage at the locations. Grabbed images and clips off the Web. Cut it on iMovie on my Mac Pro. After crafting a 25-minute video, I screened it on my laptop to anybody who would watch.

My mentor, Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award-winner Gerald Chamales, taught me that it takes audacity and determination to achieve one's goals. The four basic principles of success are 1) A burning desire.

Rick Halsey and Iliff taking in a rose ranch sunset



2) A definite plan culled from the masters.
 3) An elimination of negativity. 4) Align yourself with like-minded individuals who share your dream.

My agency offered little help. The commission on a low-budget film is too small to inspire much of an effort. So, I looked elsewhere to build my team. I needed a powerful “brand name” to add expertise and credibility to the project. I went to big-time producer and former studio chief Mark Canton (*300*). I showed him my iMovie. Sold him on my dream. We negotiated a deal, giving Canton a big chunk of the producer’s pie for lending his name, expertise and connections to my project. Then I gave David Hopwood, who runs Canton’s company, his first producer credit for helping lead the charge and coerce his boss into making the “big calls” as needed.

We filed an application for the California Film & Television Tax Credit. Sadly, we were

promptly informed we were #38 on the waiting list. In other words, forget about it.

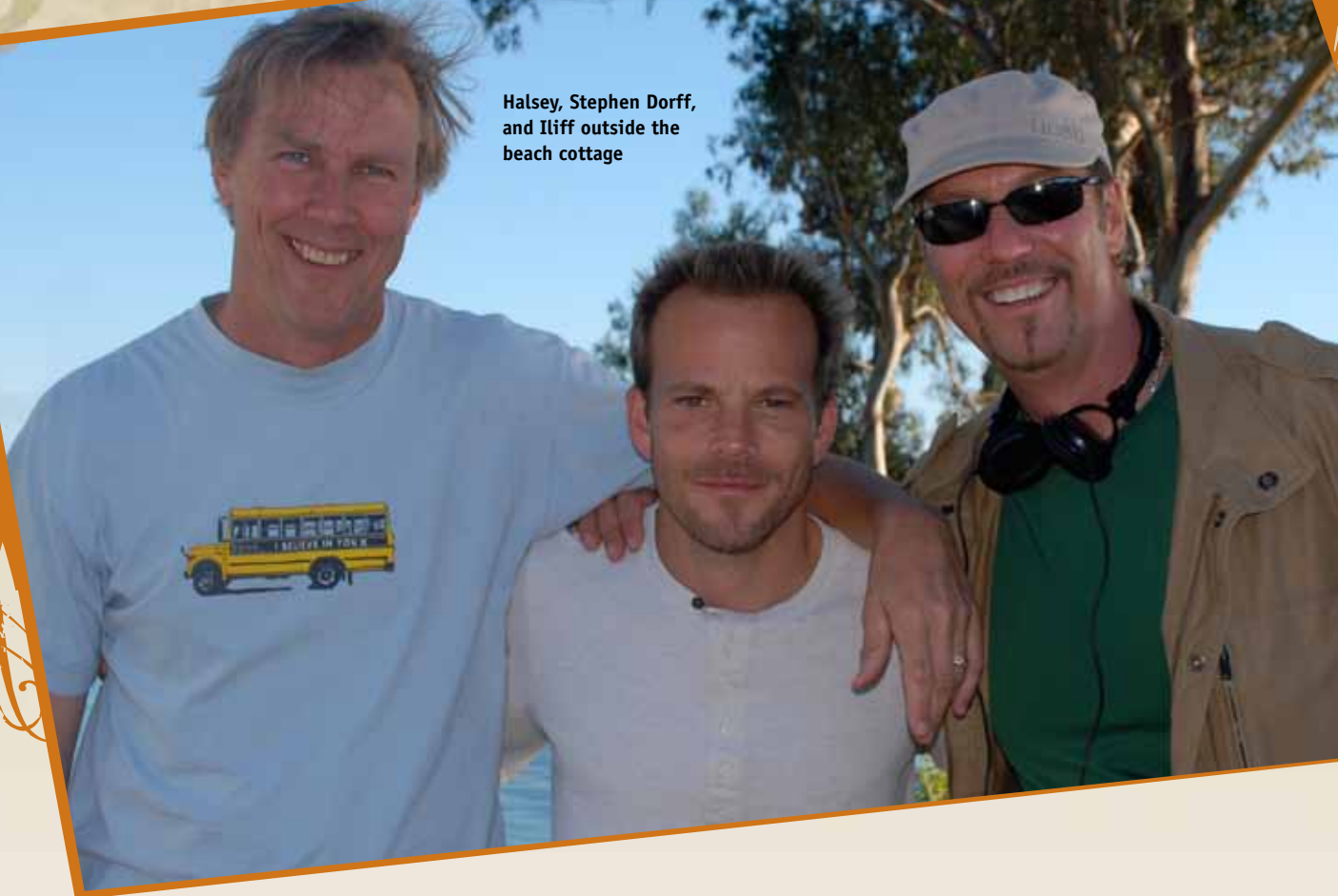
We spoke to foreign sales outfits about our business plan. That’s when our model changed. The declining DVD market meant low-budget films were a bad idea. They preached the need to pay for big-name stars or nobody will ever see your film. No distributors will buy it. We also learned “horror” films were tanking. A glut of poor-quality slasher films had killed the genre. We were told the best buzzword to market our film was as a “youth-oriented elevated thriller.”

Hollywood managers and agents did not respond to the script originally titled *Party Killer*. It sounded too slasher. The title was killing us. So, we changed it to *Rites of Passage*. Suddenly, we were a “classy” project. And since I was constantly doing rewrites based on notes from industry pals, now we could get new coverage. We spent money to commence

a casting director. We made actor lists and found availabilities. We called foreign sales outfits and asked which stars would justify our budget. One of our top choices, Christian Slater, was considered a “plus 1.” That meant if we landed Slater and another actor of his caliber, we would be able to sell our package and raise the money to make the film.

But first, we needed enough money to make offers and transfer funds into an escrow account if the actors said yes. I started showing my iMovie again. Soon we had enough cash and aggressively went after Slater. Six weeks passed and nothing. I networked and got Slater’s personal e-mail. I wrote a passionate letter and sincerely asked Christian to help me realize my dream. Twenty minutes after receiving my e-mail, Slater replied personally. Moments later came a call from his manager. He promised Slater would read the script that night. Mark Canton lobbied in a few calls of

Halsey, Stephen Dorff, and Iliff outside the beach cottage



support. The next morning we got the call that Slater was in!

Next, Mark Canton delivered Stephen Dorff, hot off his new Sofia Coppola film *Somewhere*, which had just won best picture at the Venice Film Festival. Now with two bankable stars, financier W.D. Johnson came in with over 90% percent of the budget. He insisted that Rick and I still invest our \$200,000 “to have skin in the game.” My deal was simple. I would make \$100 to direct. Take the WGA minimum for the script. And invest \$100,000. Now this was becoming a serious investment of time and money for me. I had to make sure to surround myself with top pros to mentor me. Stay humble. Refrain from behaving like a know-it-all. The best advice I received was to compensate for my lack of directing experience with extra preparation.

Cinematographer Alex Nepomniaschy

(*Narc*) and I spent months shot-listing the film. The first half would be shot mostly with a steadicam, and as chaos and confusion built in the second half, the film would be shot entirely handheld. We used two Red MX cameras and allocated extra money for high-speed lenses. We storyboarded the film, but frankly, I found shot lists and time spent developing a blocking style far more valuable.

I allowed my actors to help improve the screenplay. These days Hollywood wants a script to be 105 pages or less. Using the old adage of a page per minute, a running time of an hour and 45 minutes is about as long as distributors will allow for a youth-oriented thriller. With an ensemble film, the director better give all the actors a line or something to do, or they will riot on the set. Otherwise secondary characters get lost. But, you cannot write all that dialogue and stage direction into your draft because the script will be way too long.

Once you have locked pages on your shooting script, you can start adding that dialogue and enhance the secondary characters. Since *Rites of Passage* does not depend upon specific exposition that needs to be said exactly as written (unlike other films of mine such as *Patriot Games* or *Under Suspicion*), I welcomed improvisation from my actors. We staged a table read. I furiously scribbled notes and infused the script with their improvisations. Then we budgeted for a week of rehearsal. I sat privately with each actor, discussing his or her character, and kept rewriting the script to reflect the wonderful discoveries we made together.

Suddenly, October came and there were 100 people on set looking at me to say something. Rick and I gave each other a big hug, and we started rehearsing the first scene for camera. Directing for me was a natural extension of writing. Every decision came from knowing what was best for the story. During production it dawned on me, as weeks

and months went by, that nobody else had read the entire script in a long time, and having a writer's firm knowledge of the story was invaluable.

The experience was like driving a locomotive as fast as you can without going off the rails. Sometimes it was like throwing a piñata party for a bunch of 10-year-olds.

Working with actors on set to reshape the written word, block it into a living, breathing scene, and break all that down into specific camera shots was awesome fun. We had created a family and jobs.

Sometime after 2:00 a.m. on the 27th day of shooting, I called out "that's a picture wrap." The next day the California Film & Television Tax Credit called. We had gotten our tax credit!

Before I knew it, I was in the edit room writing the "third screenplay." Here, you can surgically cut lines from scenes to increase pace. Or use only portions of scenes. You debate which take to use, which performance is best, which nuance of inflection best defines your characters. You can flip around the order of scenes. You can intercut to build tension. And with action scenes, you can electronically zoom or ramp speed to energize each shot of a sequence. Then comes sound design. Music. Visual effects. The list of possibilities is endless in the edit room. For a writer, sitting with a talented editor working on Final Cut Pro, it is pure heaven to obsess with your creation.

I am grateful beyond words for this opportunity to have the coolest job in Hollywood. I am no longer just a typist. I need to thank that condescending producer. He gave me inspiration. He gave me the kick in the butt I needed to go after my dream. I hope this story inspires you to go after yours. ✨



W. PETER ILIFF quit waiting tables and became a full-time screenwriter when he sold his script *Point Break* to Ridley Scott and Columbia Pictures in 1987. The film fell apart, only to be made later, but he was fortunate to begin a 22-year career as a WGA card-carrying studio writer. He has written under contract for nearly every studio and TV network in Hollywood. Over 50 times, he has been hired and paid six figures to write, rewrite or doctor a script. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife Ruthanne and two children, Dane and Bella. The hilarious theatre production of *Point Break Live* is now in its second year in L.A. It is opening soon in San Francisco.