

SPIELBERG



SPIELBERG

The Man, the Movies, the Mythology

UPDATED EDITION

Frank Sanello

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The Reluctant Jew

For a Jew, it's a shame Steven Spielberg is so white bread.

—megafilm producer Don Simpson
(*Crimson Tide*)

The conventional has always appealed to Steven.

—Leah Adler, his mother

There are literally six million stories that could be told about the Holocaust. It speaks volumes about Steven Spielberg that he chose perhaps the only one with a happy ending.

—an industry source

IF EVER AN ARTIST'S BODY OF WORK WAS A product of his upbringing and background, director Steven Spielberg's films are exactly that.

His mother Leah was an accomplished classical pianist. His father an inventor and electrical engineer who designed computers for RCA, GE, and IBM.

Spielberg and his work can be seen as a fusion of these two very different parents. His father's influence contributed the techno-wizardry which is the hallmark of most Spielberg films, all those sci-fi epics and scare-'em-to-death roller-coaster rides. His mother's artistic bent provided the aesthetic balance which enriched his low-tech, character-driven films like *Schindler's List* and *The Color Purple*.

Spielberg's religious upbringing—or lack thereof—influenced not only his formative years but the flavor and content of his films.

“I wasn't a religious kid, although I was Bar Mitzvahed in a real Orthodox synagogue,” he once recalled. His earliest memory was of entering a Cincinnati synagogue for services with Hasidic elders. “The old men were handing me little crackers. My parents said later I must have been about six months old!”

His early works were indeed as Don Simpson said, “white bread.” Spielberg's fascination with WASPY suburbia under siege in everything from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* to *Poltergeist* reflected his own childhood, growing up Jewish in primarily Anglo-Saxon neighborhoods. He was once the alien and the insider. The local boy who was somehow different by reason of his Jewishness.

In childhood, it's fair to say Steven Spielberg was a reluctant Jew. The theme of longing to belong permeated much of his work until only recently. It was only after fully accepting his Jewishness that Spielberg flowered as a mature artist, capable of producing his Oscar-winning masterpiece, *Schindler's List*.

Baby Mogul

STEVEN SPIELBERG WAS BORN DECEMBER 18, 1946, in Cincinnati. (For years he asserted that his birthdate was 1947. But in 1995, in response to a long-running legal battle, Spielberg acknowledged that 1946 was the correct year.) His father's work as an electrical engineer led to a change of jobs and home every few years. Young Steven remembered himself as always being the new kid on the block, the new boy at school, never fitting in. Whenever he finally did manage to insinuate himself into the local crowd, the family would up and move to a new city.

After Cincinnati, there was a brief stop in Haddonfield, New Jersey. Then the family settled for its longest period in Scottsdale, Arizona. Steven lived in this Ur-Wasp suburb from the ages of nine to sixteen.

His mother, Leah, an adventurous type, did not want to live in a Jewish neighborhood and always plopped the family down right into the middle of Gentile, U.S.A. Today, his mother regrets the rejection of her roots. "I was raised in an Orthodox home, but I chose to rear my children in non-Jewish neighborhoods. That was my one really big mistake. The kids next door used to stand outside yelling, 'The Spielbergs are dirty Jews.' So one night Steven snuck out of the house and peanut buttered all their windows."

Spielberg found belonging to the only Jewish family on the block a lonely position, especially at Christmas, when theirs was the sole house in the neighborhood unlit by decorations. In vain, the dying-to-assimilate youth begged his father to at least put a red light in the window. "I was ashamed because I was living on a street where at Christmas we were the only house with nothing but a porch light on," he has said.

His parents refused, but not out of any great sense of Jewish identity or pride. In fact, Spielberg remembers that when the family moved from New Jersey to Scottsdale, they stopped keeping kosher for no particular reason.

Spielberg has described his family as "storefront kosher." That's the equivalent of cafeteria Catholics, those who pick and choose what dicta of the Pope to believe or discard, sort of like selecting the broccoli but rejecting the jicama at the salad bar.

The Spielbergs' storefront kosherism had the flavor of an ethnic sitcom. Leah Spielberg (*nee* Posner) loved shellfish, a food strictly verboten by Judaic dietary laws. One day when she and her son, who shared his mother's fondness for crustaceans, were about to pop two giant lobsters into a pot of boiling water, their rabbi pulled into the driveway for an unannounced visit.

You can almost hear the television laughtrack in the background as Leah instructed her son to hide the offending creatures under his bed.

"The rabbi came to my room to see how I was doing," Spielberg wrote in a first person memoir in *Time* magazine. "You could hear the lobsters clicking and clacking at each other with their tails. The rabbi just sort of stared and sniffed the air; he must have wondered what that *tref* (unkosher) scene was, lingering in the kid's bedroom. The minute the rabbi left, my mom and I gleefully threw the

lobsters into a pot of boiling water and then ate them.”

Years later, Leah, divorced and remarried to Bernie Adler, would atone for such sins by opening a popular kosher deli in west Los Angeles, called the Milky Way in honor of her son's galactic epic *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. But back then, she now concedes, her faith was less than integral to her life. “It was a very nothing part of our lives. All we did was light candles on the Sabbath,” she recalls.

While these close encounters with strict Judaism had a sitcom whimsy to them, other incidents relating to the Spielbergs' faith ranged from scary to downright ugly.

Growing up, Steven never recalled his parents or relatives referring to the Holocaust or Nazis by name. He did remember hearing, however, terms like “those murdering bastards. My parents referred to the Holocaust as ‘those murdering sons of bitches.’ ” In fact, distant cousins perished in Poland and the Ukraine, victims of the Final Solution.

His grandmother taught English to Holocaust survivors who had emigrated to America. His earliest encounter with the event that would lead to his greatest film involved a survivor of the death camps who studied English in his grandmother's home. The man taught the preschool Steven numbers by displaying the concentration camp number tattooed on his forearm. Even then, the event involved a touch of magic, which the youngster would later depict on a big screen in 70 mm. The man delighted young Steven with a grisly magic trick. By bending his arm he could make the number six on his arm turn into a nine.

Other Holocaust memories were appropriately more bleak and anticipated the terror component of his masterpiece. A relative told a story of an accomplished classical pianist in Berlin. (Shades of mom.) During the Nazi era, this woman had the temerity to play a work by a forbidden Jewish composer in public. In the middle of her performance, Nazi thugs ran up on stage and broke all her fingers so she would never be able to play again.

“I grew up with stories of Nazis breaking the fingers of Jews,” Spielberg has said.

Pop psychologists might say he later tried to domesticate those fears in two Indiana Jones films with cardboard Nazis who weren't nearly as scary as the real thing from his childhood. But ultimately he would confront these childhood bogeymen in an authentic way in *Schindler's List*.

Another story which could have come from *Schindler's List*, but instead came from a Spielberg relative, dealt with a woman who was wearing a wedding ring which the Nazis demanded she surrender. The woman apparently had put on weight since her marriage, and the ring refused to budge. The Nazis were about to cut off her finger when nervousness caused the ring to miraculously slip off her hand.

These stories no doubt instilled awe and wonder, but they didn't instill a whole lot of pride. All children long to belong, and Steven, growing up in Wasp-ville, was no different. His desire to assimilate, however, was so shameful a memory that it wasn't until years later, when *Schindler's List* had forced him to confront his own ambivalence toward Judaism, that he finally told his mother an embarrassing incident from his youth.

Every night before he went to bed, he would fasten duct tape to his nose, pushing it toward his forehead in the forlorn hope of developing an upturned, Wasp-like snout.

Groaning, he recalled the incident in a magazine interview: “Oh, god, oh my god! It's true! I used to take a big piece of duct tape and put one end on the tip of my nose and the other end as high up on my forehead line as I could. I had this big nose. My face grew into it, but when I was a child, I was very self-conscious about my schnozz. I thought if you kept your nose taped up that it would stay . . . like Silly Putty!”

Years later, Don Simpson and film critics would complain that the director's fascination with

Wasp suburbia in films like *E.T.* and *Poltergeist* were the cinematic equivalent of taping his nose to his forehead. In fact, one critic derisively described the director's infatuation with white-bread suburbia on film as a "triumph of assimilation."

Growing up presented big and small problems of assimilation and acceptance. Spielberg once recalled: "We were always leaving schools and relocating. My father assimilated into the gentile world of computers, and that's a very Wasp world. We didn't live in a big Jewish community. We'd move into gentile neighborhoods where there'd be no Jewish community center. There'd be a temple somewhere where we'd go on Friday nights and High Holy Days, but I was pretty much the only Jew I knew for many years outside my family."

He also recalled with classic Jewish guilt his formative years as a reluctant Jew. "It isn't something I enjoy admitting, but when I was seven, eight, nine years old, God forgive me, I was embarrassed because we were Orthodox Jews. I was embarrassed by the outward perception of my parents' Jewish practices. I was embarrassed because I wanted to be like everybody else. I didn't feel comfortable with who I was. I was never really *ashamed* to be Jewish, but I was uneasy at times. My grandfather always wore a long black coat, black hat and long white beard. I was embarrassed to invite my friends over to the house because he might be in a corner *davening* [praying], and I wouldn't know how to explain this to my Wasp friends."

This internalized anti-Semitism didn't become external, he said, until the family moved to Saratoga, California, near San Francisco, when he was sixteen. His father had gotten a job at a nearby Palo Alto computer company, and Steven was once again the new kid in school.

And the only Jewish one.

Here his aesthetic desire to look gentile from the tape duct days turned into a matter of survival, not just cosmetics. During his senior year at Arcadia High, students would cough the word "Jew" as he passed them in the hall. In study hall, other kids would throw pennies at him, hoping he would pick them up and "prove" how miserly Jews were.

"It was six months of personal horror. And to this day I haven't gotten over it, nor have I forgiven any of them," he told an interviewer years later. And he still doesn't suffer anti-Semites gladly. Recently, he purchased a car for a friend from a Santa Monica, California, dealer. The salesman boasted after the sale, "I just got a Jew to pay full price for a car!" Somehow this comment got back to Spielberg, and he cancelled the order. The horrified owner of the dealership apologized profusely, but Spielberg refused to reinstate the order.

The salesman's anti-Semitism obviously opened old wounds that have never and probably will never completely heal. But that slur was mild compared to some of the anti-Semitism he experienced in high school. "I was embarrassed, I was self-conscious, I was always aware that I stood out because of my Jewishness. In high school, I got smacked and kicked to the ground in P.E., in the locker room, in the showers. Two bloody noses. It was horrible. We couldn't stop it. So my mom picked me up in her car every day after school and took me home."

One nemesis left a legacy that still embitters him to this day, although at the time his knack for filmmaking helped him cope and even conquer.

A bully, the biggest boy in class, used to bloody his nose, stick his head in the water fountain, and grind his face into the dirt. Once, the young thug threw a cherry bomb between Steven's legs while he was sitting on the toilet at school. "I got up before it exploded," Spielberg recalled.

Adding insult to injury, his tormentor would shout anti-Semitic slurs at Spielberg. "He had a very limited vocabulary," Spielberg recalled dryly.

"Then I figured, if you can't beat him, try to get him to join you." Spielberg told the delinquent he was making a film about World War II and wanted to cast the bully (against type) as a John

Wayne-type hero. “He did look a little like John Wayne. He sure was as big as Wayne,” Spielberg recalled with perhaps the exaggerated memory of childhood. At first the bully continued to torment him, but eventually succumbed to the lure of movie stardom.

“I converted him to being my friend, even though I don’t think I was ever his friend, because I never quite forgot the taunting and how intimidated I was around him. Even when he was in one of my movies, I was afraid of him. But I was able to bring him over to a place where I felt safer: in front of my camera. I discovered what a tool and a weapon a camera was, what an instrument of self-inspection and self-expression it is.” And in the case of the bully-turned-buddy, one of self-preservation.

The film, entitled *Escape to Nowhere*, also introduced him to the world of special effects. It was the beginning of a love affair that continues to this day. He took his adolescent cast to the desert to shoot an “epic” battle between Nazis and British. To create a low-tech shell explosion, he dug two holes in the ground and put a wooden plank with flour between them. He covered the construction with a bush. When the soldiers ran over the board, the flour seesawed and made a perfect geyser in the air.

“Matter of fact,” he said later, “it works better than gunpowder used in movies today.”

The fifteen-minute film cost fifty dollars and won first prize at a teen film festival.

Steven’s three younger sisters also were cast in his films, but he didn’t treat them with the fearful respect he extended to the class bully. Instead he specialized in terrorizing his siblings, a feat he would accomplish on a much larger scale with a much larger audience—the whole world—years later.

“I would experiment with terror on my sisters. I killed them all several times,” he has said. He loved casting his sisters in his epics “because I could trash them any way I felt like. I killed them over and over again, and it was all in the interest of telling a good story. After my third or fourth little mm epic, I knew this was going to be a career, not just a hobby. I had learned that film was power.”

“Steven was not a cuddly child,” his mother has recalled. “He was scary. When he woke up from a nap, I shook. He was quite weird as a child and prone to terrorizing his three sisters.” She mentioned the time he decapitated his sister’s favorite doll and served it to her on a bed of lettuce. Another time he bought a plastic skull at a novelty store and hooked it up to a flashlight. Before locking his sister in the closet, he switched on the flashlight, then enjoyed the screams that came pouring out from behind the closed door.

His sister Sue, a mother of two in suburban Washington, D.C., remembers adventures with her older brother baby-sitting that were pure torture. “When he was baby-sitting for us he’d resort to creative torture. One time he came into the bedroom with his face wrapped in toilet paper like a mummy. He peeled off the paper layer by layer and threw it at us. He was a delight, *but a terror*. And we kept coming back for more.”

His sister also could be describing her brother’s uncanny knack for getting young filmgoers to see his films multiple times, thus ensuring their blockbuster grosses (about the only way a film can make a half billion dollars).

His youngest sister Nancy, now a jewelry designer in New York City, remembers being one of the first actresses ever cast by the fledgling director. Even then, there were creative differences on the set.

When Steven was sixteen, he made a science fiction thriller called *Firelight*, whose theme would eerily foreshadow *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. “I played a kid in the backyard,” Nancy remembers, “who was supposed to reach up toward the ‘firelight’ [UFO] in the sky. Steven had me look directly at the sun. ‘Quit squinting,’ ” the pint-sized De Mille would shout. “ ‘Don’t blink!’ And though I might have gone blind, I did what he said because after all, it was Steven directing.”

It wasn’t just family members he managed to wrap around his fingers in pursuit of filmmaking. Adults found themselves curiously corralled by his obsessive will. “People ask me if I knew Steven

was a genius,” his mother says. “I didn’t know what Steven was. From twelve on, he was always writing little scripts and enlisting everyone to act in them. I supplied the cold cuts.”

“Once he got a hospital to close off a wing for one of his location shots,” Leah continues adding that the wing included the emergency rooms. “Another time he got the airport to close a runway. No one ever said no to him, and it’s a good thing. Steven doesn’t understand no.”

A forerunner of bigger things to come, *Firelight* was his first film to turn a profit. He borrowed the \$400 it cost to make the film from his father. Later, it premiered at a local movie theater and grossed \$500. His first net was a whopping \$100.

When they weren’t collaborating on films, he still enjoyed tormenting his siblings. “We were sitting with our dolls,” Nancy says, “and Steven was singing as if he was on the radio. Then he interrupted himself to bring us an important message. He announced a tornado was coming, then he flipped us over his head to ‘safety.’

“If we looked at him he once said, we’d turn to stone.”

Spielberg doesn’t deny his wild child days and has offered up his own anecdotes almost proudly. “I loved terrifying my sisters to the point of cardiac arrest. I remember a movie on TV with a Martini who kept a severed head in a fishbowl. It scared them so much they couldn’t watch it. So I locked them in a closet with a fish bowl. I can still hear the terror breaking in their voices.”

His mother recounts other deeds committed by her demon seed: “He used to stand outside his sisters’ windows at night, howling, ‘I am the moon. I am the moon!’ I think those poor girls are still scared of the moon.”

While he could instill terror, Spielberg wasn’t immune from the sensation himself. His childhood, as he tells it, was full of fears of things that go bump in the night. At six, the death of Bambi’s mother and just about everything in *Fantasia* scared the hell out of him. But he remembers enjoying the sensation. “There were scenes of utter violence and sheer terror in *Bambi* and *Snow White*. They terrorized me as a child and I’ll never forget them,” he has said.

These childhood phobias later would be re-created in his films, especially *Poltergeist*, the ultimate child horror film, which he wrote and produced. A clown doll, which Spielberg called his “biggest fear,” figured prominently in one of *Poltergeist*’s scariest sequences. “Also the tree I could see outside my room.” (Another *Poltergeist* element.) “Also anything that might be under the bed or in the closet. Also ‘Dragnet’ on TV. Also a crack in the bedroom wall—I thought ghosts might come from it.” (They did, again in *Poltergeist*.)

Many of his childhood fears remain with him to this day. Like so many artists, he seems to hold on to the awe and fascination—and fear—that make childhood such a magical and scary time. To this day, he refuses to go into an elevator alone because he fears it will get stuck between floors and his whitened bones will be found two weeks later. Whenever possible, he skips elevators altogether. Amblin, his production office on the backlot at Universal, was built specifically with only two stories so he’d never have to set foot in an elevator at work. In fact, he has been known to hold business meetings in the lobby of a building to avoid using the lift.

He’s a hypochondriac, beset by fears both rational and irrational. He has nightmares that his house is being engulfed by waves and dreams about piling sandbags around the foundation, yet he lives on the beach. He refuses to go in the water because “there are sharks out there,” although the closest sharks have ever come to southern California is twenty miles off shore. “And they were baby sharks,” Captain Bob Buchanan of the Los Angeles County Fire Department/Lifeguard Division says dramatically easing any fears the phobic director may have about taking a dip in the Pacific Ocean. Unless, of course, Spielberg is a champion marathoner who likes to swim to Catalina as a lark.

He’s also afraid of furniture with feet. “I wait for them to walk out of the room,” he has said, on

half joking. Other phobias includes snakes and insects, both prominently featured in several of his films. "I think we survive on our fears," he has said.

His mother remembers, "Steven always had a highly developed imagination. He was afraid of *everything*. When he was little, he would insist that I lift the top of the baby grand piano so he could see the strings while I played. Then he would fall on the floor, screaming in fear."

But as she also remembers, it was more common for her son to be the terrorist rather than the terrorized. She tells anecdotes that sound like fodder for an episode of the *Addams Family*, not a nice assimilated Jewish family in Scottsdale, Arizona. "He terrified everybody," she says. "Baby-sitters would come into the house. They'd say, 'We'll take care of the girls if you take *him* with you.'"

His sister Anne remembers, "Every Saturday morning my parents would escape from the four of us kids. The minute they were out of the house I would run to my room and blockade the door. Steven would push it all away and then punch me out. My arms would be all black and blue. Sue and Nancy would get it next, if they had done some misdeed. Then when he was through doling out punishment we would all get down to making his movies."

His sister Anne, who later would earn an Oscar nomination for her screenplay for *Big*, remembers her brother's earliest days as the director from hell: "He'd always have us in crazy costumes doing outrageous things. At the preview of *Jaws*, I remember thinking, 'For years he just scared *us*. Now he gets to scare the masses.'"

Spielberg has never disagreed with his mother's assessment of his formative years. Like her, he seems to feel a certain warped pride. "I often think depravity is the inspiration for my entire career," he said recently. "My parents were rigid about not letting me see horror films, so I staged my own, faking the chopping off of arms and legs and using buckets of fake blood."

Leah Adler had grown up in a poor family in Cincinnati. But despite the lack of material wealth, her childhood was like a fairy tale. Her father adored her. Her mother adored her. "She'd look at me and just grin," Adler said of her mother. Adler in turn raised her four children that way, adoring and encouraging every one of them.

Mom Spielberg had to be the ultimate permissive parent, but she was also a good child psychologist. She would break up fights among the children by having each side tell his or her story. Then she'd say, "Go back to arguing." The kids were so shocked by her reaction they'd stop fighting.

She was also a stage mother, film division. Basically, the word "no" was the only thing forbidden in the Spielberg household, at least as far as his mother was concerned.

"His room was such a mess, you could grow mushrooms," she says with a mixture of pride and horror. "Once his lizard got out of its cage, and we found it—living—three years later! He had a parakeet he refused to keep in a cage at all. There would be birds flying around and birdseed all over the floor. It was disgusting. Once a week, I would stick my head in his room, grab his dirty laundry and slam the door. If I had known better, I would have taken him to a psychiatrist, and there never would have been an *E.T.* His badness was so original that there weren't even books to tell you what to do."

"My mother used to say, 'The world is gonna hear of this boy.' I think she said that so I wouldn't kill him."

Actually, Mrs. Spielberg encouraged her son in his film endeavors.

"I was a very delinquent parent," she says without any discernible guilt. "I became a member of my kids' gang. If they wanted to stay home from school, they did. I'd say, 'Let's go out in the desert with the guys,' and then I'd write lying notes to their teachers about gastrointestinal diseases."

Once, when he needed to shoot a scene that called for gore, he persuaded Mom to boil thirty cans of cherries in a pressure cooker until they exploded and covered the kitchen cabinets with ersatz

blood. She remembers that for years after, “Every morning, I’d come downstairs, and while I made coffee I’d clean the cherries off the cabinets.”

On another occasion, when he was shooting a mini war epic on 8 mm, he persuaded his mother to participate. “She’d drop everything, climb into the Jeep, race out behind Camelback Mountain and helter-skelter barrel through the shot, hitting the potholes, her blond hair sticking out from under the pith helmet,” he told *Time* magazine. Even back then, Spielberg was learning how to stretch a movie budget, making less look like more. With his mother impersonating a male GI, he recalled, “I would have my ‘production value.’ My \$7 film suddenly looked like a \$24 film.”

Although he may have gotten all his artistic inheritance from his piano-playing mother, Spielberg got his first break as a moviemaker from his father. When the youngster was twelve, his mother gave his father an 8 mm Kodak camera to memorialize their camping trips.

Spielberg describes his father’s home movies and how the young would-be director soon was hogging his dad’s Father’s Day gift. “The events of the trips were pretty El Snoro, so I tended to sort of tweak reality and try to get a little more drama into, say, catching trout.

“He’d take the camera out on family camping trips, and then we’d have to endure his home photography. So one day I said, ‘Dad, can I be the family photographer?’ And he gave me the camera. My dad had to wait for me to say ‘Action!’ before he could put the knife into the fish to clean it.

“That was my first PG-13 moment.”

Soon, the avid filmmaker had graduated to more spectacular subjects than fish gutting. “My first real movie was of my Lionel trains crashing into each other. I used to love to stage little wrecks. I put my eye right to the tracks and watch the trains crashing,” he recalled.

Spielberg became obsessed with his new hobby. He would spend hours alone in his room writing scripts and storyboarding shots on paper, a practice he continues to this day during preproduction on film.

“Movies took the place of crayons and charcoal, and I was able to represent my life at twenty-four frames a second,” he later said, describing the beginning of a lifelong love affair with celluloid.

Although his father launched him on his film career, the two were never close. At least that’s how the younger Spielberg remembers the relationship. Once, an interviewer asked him point-blank if he ever felt affection from his father. Spielberg said, “No, and I think that was a mistake on his part. I don’t want to repeat that error. I know that I always felt my father put his work before me. I always thought he loved me less than his work, and I suffered as a result.

“I remember being bored to tears when my father had businessmen over to the house and they would always talk computers. My own technical proficiency is knowing how to use the Yellow Pages when something breaks.” Years later, he would finally come to appreciate his father’s high-tech world when he was forced to comprehend the arcana of computerization that made the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* come to life. The Yellow Pages apparently didn’t have a listing for computer-operated tyrannosaurs.

His father’s recollections, perhaps in self-excusatory hindsight, suggest he was more hands-on than his son has asserted. “It was creative and chaotic at our house,” Arnold Spielberg said in 1987. “I’d help Steven construct sets for his 8 mm movies, with toy trucks and papier mache mountains. At night, I’d tell the kids cliffhanger tales about characters like Joanie Frothy Flakes and Lenny Ludehead. I see pieces of me in Steven. I see the storyteller.”

And it is indisputable that his father gave him his first movie prop, a Lionel train set which his son happily crashed on film over and over again. “I would stage these very complex accidents on the rails,” Spielberg said, “and somehow, intuitively, I would film these perfect crashes. When I got the film back, I would be amazed at how my little trains looked like multi-ton locomotives.”

He was also a natural cinematographer who managed to make the toys look like giant locomotives by unconsciously realizing that by shooting the trains from a low angle, they would appear life-sized on screen.

Arnold Spielberg had mixed feelings about his son's burgeoning interest in filmmaking, even though he was the originator and willing participant in his son's budding career. Arnold came from a poor family, and he pushed a practical, scientific career on his son in reaction to his own childhood poverty. During an amazingly successful career, Arnold worked for IBM, RCA, and GE. He holds a whopping twelve patents in his name. Today, retired, he makes industrial sales films, which he shows to his son for input.

Dad was pure left-brained, analytical, scientific. Young Steven was his mother's son, creative, free-spirited and undisciplined about everything but making movies.

Still, Steven undeniably got half his chromosomes from his father. "Steven's love and mastery of technology definitely comes from our father," his sister Sue says.

There's a telling incident from Spielberg's youth which sounds like myth but actually happened, or so the director insists. The scene also encapsulates the subtle tension between father and son.

One day, the elder Spielberg came home and showed his son a small object in his hand. "This is a transistor. This is the future." Steven immediately put the tiny gizmo in his mouth and swallowed it. "My parents called the police to get it out," he said.

Years later, Spielberg would claim with some guilt that he was dismissing or denying his father's world by so quickly disposing of the man's prize. Film historians and psychologists might propose another theory: Spielberg at an early age had intuitively grasped that technology later would dominate his filmmaking and swallowed it whole, embracing it as he later would embrace optical effects and interactive video. If Steven had been born ten years later, he might have swallowed a silicon chip instead.

There was no real enmity between father and son, however—just a totally different mindset. Without bitterness, the director later would describe his father's yin and his own ill-fitting yang: "My dad was of that World War II ethic. He brought home the bacon, and my mom cooked it, and we ate it. I went to my dad with things, but he was always analytical. I was more passionate in my approach to any question, and so we always clashed. I was yearning for drama."

There was happily no tension between his artistic mother and her talented son. Sister Sue recalls, "Mom was artistic and whimsical. She led the way for Steven to be as creative as he wanted to be. We were Bohemians growing up in suburbia."

In fact, her permissiveness practically bordered on negligence when she allowed him to stay home from school at least once a week so he could edit the footage he had shot over the weekend. Spielberg recalled, "I would fake being sick. I'd put the thermometer up to the light bulb," just as young Elliot does in *E.T.* so he can stay home and play with his extraterrestrial pal. But unlike the mother in *E.T.*, Mrs. Spielberg knew her son was faking it and let him stay home anyway. "I'd call him in and moan and groan. She'd play along and say, 'My god, you're burning up. You're staying home today.'"

Today, his mother defends her outlandish permissiveness. "I was never a typical parent," she says with understatement. "I think if a kid wants something, he ought to have it." Once Steven wanted a job to finance a "big budget" opus, so she suggested he paint the bathroom. "He did the toilet and the mirror, then he quit," she recalls.

It wasn't only a love of filmmaking that turned him into a frequent truant. Steven hated school. "From age twelve or thirteen I knew I wanted to be a movie director, and I didn't think that science or math or foreign languages were going to help me turn out the little 8 mm sagas I was making to avoid

homework.”

~~To instill a love of literature in his son, his father gave him a copy of *The Scarlet Letter*. Steven hated to read so he drew stick figures of a bowler knocking down pins on the edge of each page. Whenever he flicked the pages, the pins went tumbling down. Today, he calls *The Scarlet Letter* his “first film” adapted from another medium.”~~

He also has praised his father for forcing him to study “just enough math” so he wouldn’t actually flunk a grade. He did flunk gym class three years in a row. “I couldn’t do a chin-up or a fraction. I can do a chin-up now, but I still can’t do a fraction.” In fact, the king of computer-guided special effects has confessed that he still counts on his fingers. “When my dad sees me counting on my fingers, he looks away.”

His father used to wake him up early and tutor him in math every morning. These tutorials would have been comical if they hadn’t been so frustrating for his well-meaning father. “I hated math. I didn’t like when they’d stack the numbers on top of one another. My father used to say things like, ‘3 won’t go into 4,’ and I’d say, ‘Of course it won’t! You can’t put that 3 into the little hole on top of the 4. It won’t fit.’ ”

To this day, Spielberg remains a techno-peasant when it comes to anything more sophisticated than a touch-tone phone.

Based on his lifelong dislike of reading, it seems possible that Spielberg’s academic difficulties may have been caused by a learning disorder, perhaps dyslexia. “I was not a reader, and I’m still not a reader. I just don’t like reading. I’m a very slow reader. And because I’m so slow, it makes me feel guilty that it might take me three hours to read a 110-page screenplay that I even wrote the story for. So I don’t read a lot. I have not read for pleasure in many years. And that’s sort of a shame. I think I am really part of the Eisenhower generation of TV.”

For all his mother’s permissiveness, both she and her husband tried to thwart television’s pernicious influence on their children. The television set in the Spielberg household usually had a blanket over it.



In school, Steven was nicknamed “the retard,” and once lost a race to a boy in the class who actually was retarded.

As painful as the incident was, the details reveal a young man with a precociously big heart and a capacity for empathy unusual in a preadolescent.

“The height of my wimpery came when we had to run a mile for a grade in elementary school,” he has said. “The whole class of fifty finished, except for two people left on the track—me and a mentally retarded boy. Of course *he* ran awkwardly, but I was just never able to run. I was maybe 40 yards ahead of him, and I was only 100 yards away from the finish line. The whole class turned around and began rooting for the young retarded boy—cheering him, saying, ‘C’mon, c’mon, beat Spielberg! Run, run!’ ”

“It was like he came to life for the first time, and he began to pour it on but still not fast enough to beat me. And I remember thinking, ‘OK, now how am I gonna fall and make it look like I really fell?’ And I remember actually stepping on my toe and going face hard into the red clay of the track and actually scraping my nose. Everybody cheered when I fell, and then they began to really scream for this guy: ‘C’mon, John, c’mon, run, run!’ I got up just as John came up behind me, and I began running as if to beat him but not really to win, running to let *him* win. We were nose to nose, and suddenly I laid back a step, then a half-step. Suddenly he was ahead, then he was a chest ahead, then a length, and then he crossed the finish line ahead of me. Everybody grabbed this guy, and they threw

him up on their shoulders and carried him into the locker room, and into the showers, and I stood there on the track field and cried my eyes out for five minutes.

“I’d never felt better and I’d never felt worse in my life.”

Spielberg’s athletic humiliations were not confined to track and field. He was always the last to be chosen for the basketball or baseball team. In high school, sickened by having to dissect a frog in biology class, he ran outside to vomit along with other weak-stomached students. “The others were all girls,” he wryly recalled.

A photo published by *People* magazine taken circa 1954 shows Spielberg wasn’t exaggerating his ungainly appearance. He is shirtless and as emaciated as an extra in *Schindler’s List*. He hasn’t yet grown into his nose, which is Cyrano-sized. He’s wearing only underpants.

“I was skinny and unpopular. I was the weird, skinny kid with acne. I hate to use the word wimp, but I wasn’t in the inner loop. I never felt comfortable with myself, because I was never part of the majority. I always felt awkward and shy and on the outside of the momentum of my friends’ lives. I was never on the inside of that. I was always on the outside. I felt like an alien [shades of E.T.]. I always felt like I never belonged to anything. I never belonged to any group that I wanted to belong to.”

“Unlike Woody Allen, you know, I *wanted* to become a member of the country club,” he said.

At least he wasn’t the only one outside the loop. “I had plenty of friends who were just like me in Scottsdale. Skinny wrists and glasses. We were all just trying to make it through the year without getting our faces pushed into the drinking fountain.”

High school wasn’t a total wash, socially. He found friends in the theater arts programs, which he called “My leper colony. That’s when I realized there were options besides being a jock or a wimp.”

Like most childhood memories, Spielberg’s were more dramatic than the reality. His sister Anne insists he wasn’t quite the pariah he claims to have been. In fact, in a nerdy way, he was attractive to girls.

“A lot of the girls had crushes on him,” she recalls. “He really had an incredible personality.” She says the sister who used to get brushes from her brother’s ribbing. “He could make people do things. He made everything he was going to do sound like you wished you were a part of it.”

The Boy Scouts finally allowed him to blossom socially, but even in that arena, he now admits, “I was pretty inept.”

“Inept” is like saying the shark in *Jaws* has a terrific overbite. While demonstrating a knife-sharpening in front of 500 scouts one summer, “on the second stroke, I put the blade through my knuckle.” Thirty years later he showed the scar to an interviewer to prove it.

His adventures in scouting, like his forays into nonkosher lobstering, sound like the stuff of sitcoms. Once, after building a camp fire, he was so tired he forgot to open a can before putting it in a pot of boiling water. The can exploded, sending shrapnel in all directions. “No one was hurt,” he says, “but everyone within 20 yards of the fire needed new uniforms.”

To get the canoeing merit badge, he had to capsize a canoe, swim under it, then flip it over his head. Everything went well until it came time for the flip. “It came down on my head. I had to be pulled out of the water.”

Somehow he managed to earn the swimming merit badge, even though it required him to swim a mile. “I really couldn’t swim a mile, but it was a case of mind over muscle once I determined I was going to do it. I remember pulling myself out of the water after that in a complete sort of wet haze.”

He shone brilliantly, however, when it came time to earn the photography badge. The rule required still photographs, but Spielberg convinced the Scout master to allow him to shoot an 8 mm film instead. “If he hadn’t,” he says now, “I would have ended up becoming the finest still photographer in Scottsdale, Arizona.”

The Scout film was a three-minute epic, archly titled, *Gunsmore*, after the popular Western television series of the day, *Gunsmoke*. The extravaganza cost \$8.50, which he earned by painting trees with insecticide. The film included a stagecoach holdup, a macho sheriff, and a bad guy who went over a cliff. After the holdup, the bad guy is seen counting his money, a nifty metaphor for the director's sharklike negotiating abilities as an adult. For the special effect of the bad guy going over the cliff, Spielberg stuffed some clothes and shoes with pillows and newspapers, then threw them down a hill.

"The Boy Scouts put me in the center of the loop. It sort of brought out things I did well at and forgave me for things I didn't," he said.

Besides scouting, Spielberg also succeeded in fitting in school by joining the school band and the orchestras in the fourth grade. He played the clarinet. "I've marched in more rodeo parades and stepped in more horse pies than anybody I know," he recalled, laughing. "But I chose film instead."

Steven was showing himself to be not just a precocious filmmaker but a savvy exhibitor as well. From the age of twelve on, he rented 8 mm movies which he screened for all the kids in the neighborhood. His three sisters would distribute flyers he had painstakingly printed. On hot Saturday mornings all summer long, the Spielbergs' living room resonated with the screams of more than thirty youngsters. Admission was thirty-five cents, and popcorn cost ten cents a bag.

By now having given up on his son ever becoming an electrical engineer, dad would gamely set up the screen and the Bell and Howell projector for his son's home movie premieres. The movie featured *Davy Crockett*, which he rented from an 8 mm movie catalog. "I began wanting to make people happy from the beginning of my life. As a kid, I had puppet shows. I wanted people to like my puppet shows when I was eight years old," he said.

"We all worked for Steve," his mother says. "From the minute he was born I was his employee."

When he was sixteen, the family business collapsed when his parents divorced.

For years before his parents split, he remembers the house being filled with tension between mom and dad, but the tension never erupted into full-scale fights. It was there, palpable, just underneath the surface, like the shark you sense coming in *Jaws* whenever John Williams's *thump-thump-thump* score begins to resonate on the soundtrack.

In a first person account in *Time* magazine, Spielberg remembered how traumatic his parents' split was for him and his three sisters:

"I was about 16 . . . when our parents separated. They hung in there to protect us until we were old enough. But I don't think they were aware of how acutely *we* were aware of their unhappiness—not violence, just a pervading unhappiness you could cut with a fork or a spoon at dinner every night.

"For years, I thought the word 'divorce' was the ugliest in the English language." In the *Time* magazine account, Spielberg remembered the word "divorce" and many other painful sounds traveling from his parents' bedroom to his own via the heating ducts. He and his sisters would be kept up all night by the sound of his parents' heated quarrels. The director vividly recalls having a virtual panic attack whenever he heard his parents say the *d* word. While his sisters wept, he held on to them, the big brother comforting female siblings. It took his parents six years of bitter fighting before they finally called it quits. He later admitted that he wished they had split sooner, to save the kids years of anguished eavesdropping at the heating ducts.

Still, he made it clear in his *Time* memoir that the divorce didn't embitter him toward either parent. He concluded the painful recollection saying, "I have two wonderful parents; they raised me really well."

This theme of separation from parents or loved ones would echo again and again in his adult films, whether it was the tot who was sucked out of the doggie door by extraterrestrials in *Close*

Encounters or the British schoolboy literally yanked from his parents' arms amid a rampaging mob
Empire of the Sun.

After graduating from Arcadia High in Scottsdale, the budding film director applied to UCLA, which has the best film school in the country. The state-supported school was a bargain, charging tuition that was only a fraction of private schools like USC, to which Spielberg didn't even bother apply because of the prohibitive cost.

Unfortunately, UCLA only accepts students who have graduated from the top 10 percent of the high school classes, and Spielberg, a C-student, didn't even come close.

He ended up at the less prestigious Cal State University at Long Beach, where he majored in English literature. This from a man who still hates to read!

Steve Hubbert, a teaching assistant at Cal State Long Beach, explains why the future filmmaker majored in English. "Back in those days, we didn't have a film program per se. We did have one basic film production course. I think it was a basic video production course. Steven was not too happy with Long Beach. He made films on his own." Hubbert adds that the university didn't institute its film program until the early eighties, by which time the director had already established himself as the most successful filmmaker in history.

In film school, his taste was an avant-garde style of filmmaking he would never return to professionally. His 8 mm opuses sound more like something from the youth-gains-wisdom genre of Godard or Antonioni, not the auteur of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. These film school efforts seem to combine existentialism and surrealism—conjured up by a teenager!

"I once made a film about a man being chased by someone trying to kill him. But running becomes such a spiritual pleasure for him that he forgets who is after him. I did another picture about dreams—how disjointed they are. I made one about what happens to rain when it hits dirt. They were personal little films that represented who I was.

"And then I made a slick, very professional looking film [*Amblin'*], although it had as much soul and content as a piece of driftwood," he said.

This slick film begins with a career-making connection. A fellow student and lab technician named Dennis Hoffman wanted to become a producer and put up the money so in 1969 Spielberg could make a student film called *Amblin'*.

"I crashed into somebody who wanted to be a producer. I wanted to be a director. Dennis Hoffman gave me \$15,000 to make the picture and we made it in ten days. That's what I consider my big break. It was all based on five pages that Dennis believed in," he recalled later.

The twenty-two-minute film had no dialogue. It told the story of a boy and his girlfriend hitchhiking to the Pacific Ocean from the Mojave desert. The film won awards at the Venice and Atlanta film festivals. These prestigious accolades didn't impress Spielberg. In fact, years later, he would dismiss his first professional project as a "Pepsi commercial" he made in "an attack of creative commercialism." Proving he may be his harshest critic, he added, "When I look back at the film, I can easily say, 'No wonder I didn't go to [protest at] Kent State,' or 'No wonder I didn't go to Vietnam.' I wasn't protesting when all my friends were carrying signs and getting clubbed in Century City." He was off making movies, and *Amblin'* is the slick byproduct of a kid immersed up to his nose in film.

There's more than a hint of regret when he discusses his precocious success. A feeling of opportunities lost because other opportunities—commercial ones—presented themselves so early.

"I never counted on getting started as early as I did. It just happened that I started getting jobs before I was ready to say yes," he said.

Then he mentions a colleague, one of a group of artistic directors, whom he still feels a touch of envy toward. "I might have made underground movies first: I might have been like Brian De Palma

and made nine films before breaking into the establishment.”

~~In fact, he would later say the only reason he made *Amblin*’ was to get the attention of studio executives.~~

It did. In spades.

CHAPTER TWO

Amblin' Along

IN 1966, THE SAME YEAR HIS PARENTS divorced, Spielberg took the hokey Universal Studios Tour which purported to be an inside look at the movie business. But the tour had as much to do with the nuts and bolts of moviemaking as a cigar store Indian had with Wounded Knee.

The teenager sneaked off the tram, which was a feat in itself, since the tour-goers on the backlot at Universal are as closely guarded as the presidential motorcade.

“I remember taking a bus tour through Universal Studios. I remember getting off the bus. We were all let off to go to the bathroom.

“Instead I hid between two soundstages until the bus left, and then I wandered around for three hours! I went back there every day for three months. I walked past the guard every day, waved at him and he waved back. I always wore a suit and carried a briefcase, and he assumed I was some kid related to some mogul. It was my father’s briefcase, and there was nothing in it but a sandwich and two candy bars. So every day that summer I went in in my suit and hung out with directors and writers and editors and dubbers. I found an office that wasn’t being used and became a squatter! I went to the camera store and bought some plastic name titles and put my name in the building directory: ‘Steve Spielberg, Room 23C.’

“I found an empty bungalow and set up an office. I then went to the main switchboard and introduced myself and gave them my extension so I could get calls.

“It took Universal two years to discover I was on the lot. Those two years I was there I never made any deals, but I used the phone a lot and learned how to play the game. I got fed up with the joint, though, and left and went to Long Beach College and made a short called *Amblin’*.”

Universal was his off-campus campus. He crammed fifteen course units into two days of class each week, then spent the other three days sneaking onto the backlot.

The first time he managed to break into the studio, the intruder felt as though he had found his long-lost home. “I was on the outside of a wonderful hallucination that everyone was sharing. And I wanted to do more than be part of the hallucination. I wanted to control it. I wanted to be a director,” he said.

Lower echelon executives remembered being embarrassed when Spielberg asked them to remove the pictures from their walls so he could project his little 8 mm epics.

One executive advised him, “If you make your films in 16 mm—or even better—in 35 mm, then they’ll get seen.”

Spielberg took the man’s advice. “I immediately went to work in the college cafeteria to earn money to buy 16 mm stock and rent a camera. I *had* to get those films seen.”

One of the studio personnel willing to see his films was Chuck Silver, Universal’s film librarian.

Spielberg had met Silver on the day he sneaked off the tram during the bathroom break. Silver spotted him and asked what he was doing. Spielberg somehow managed to communicate his enthusiasm to Silver, because instead of throwing the youth off the lot, he chatted with him for three

minutes. Silver even asked to see some of Spielberg's 8 mm efforts and gave him a pass so he could come back the next day without having to sneak off the tram.

"He was very impressed with my films. Then he said, 'I don't have the authority to write you any more passes, but good luck to you,'" Spielberg recalled.

But Silver hadn't forgotten his young protege. Part of Silver's job was screening upcoming films for the studio brass. After one such screening for Sid Sheinberg, then head of production for the studio's television production arm, Silver continued to run the projector and showed the executive *Amblin'*. Sheinberg remembered Silver telling him, "There's this guy who's been hanging around the place who's made a short film. So I watched it and thought it was terrific."

Sheinberg told Silver to have the young director come see him. Sheinberg was impressed with the film, but not with the filmmaker.

"I liked the way he selected the performers, the relationships, the maturity and the warmth that was in that short. I told Chuck to have the guy come see me," Sheinberg recalled. He also remembered Spielberg as "this nerdlike, scrawny character."

Sheinberg offered to put the young man under contract with the studio "for the princely sum of \$275 a week," the executive recalled with a chuckle. He has good reason to laugh at his early foresight in spotting a future talent, since that initial investment would earn the studio billions later on.

Unemployed, still a student at Cal State Long Beach, Spielberg was not so overawed by the attention from a major studio bigwig that he didn't immediately demand—politely—a concession before signing the measly contract. "I just have one request," he had the temerity to tell Sheinberg, "and I like you to give me not so much a commitment but a promise. I want to direct something before I'm twenty-one. That would be very important to me."

Impressed and amused by this young man who still looked like a teenager, Sheinberg promised, adding, "you *should* be a director." Spielberg shot back. "I think so too."

Still, the cheeky young man had misgivings. He told Sheinberg he wanted to graduate from college. "I was still several months shy of my twenty-first birthday, and I hadn't graduated from college. But Sheinberg said, 'Do you want to graduate college or do you want to be a film director?'"

"I signed the papers a week later."

Spielberg's middle-class obsession with being a college graduate vanished faster than E.T. in space. "I quit college so fast," he later recalled, "I didn't even clean out my locker."

A brief blurb in the *Hollywood Reporter* at the time announced the beginning of one spectacular and one stillborn career.

The December 12, 1968, issue said: "Steven Spielberg and Pamela McMyler, writer-director and star, respectively, of *Amblin'*, have been signed to exclusive contracts by Universal, per Sid Sheinberg, television production vice president. Spielberg, 21, is believed to be the youngest filmmaker ever contracted by a major studio. Miss McMyler, a graduate of the Pasadena Playhouse, is currently featured in *The Boston Strangler*."

Two years after *Amblin'*, McMyler had a whole gossip column devoted to her in the defunct Los Angeles *Herald-Examiner*, announcing her appearance on a two-part episode of the NBC series, *The Bold Ones*. Buried in the story as a throwaway line was the fact that her part in a "short experimental film, *Amblin'* (no director mentioned) had caught the eye of John Wayne, who cast her as his niece in the 1970 feature *Chisum*." Today McMyler is not listed with the Screen Actors Guild Directory, which means that even if Spielberg or some other filmmaker wanted to hire her, they would be hard pressed to locate the vanished actress.

One wonders if the now long-forgotten actress had any inkling how monumentally significant the little student film she had starred in would be for its director, and how little impact it would have on

her own acting career.



Sid Sheinberg was true to his word: his protege was allowed to direct before he turned twenty-one.

Daily Variety, which doesn't seem to miss any show-biz news, no matter how apparently trivial, announced in 1969: "Nine years ago Steven Spielberg borrowed his dad's birthday present, an 8 mm camera, and made his first movie, a Western, and won a Boy Scout Merit Badge. Today, at 21, he is directing Joan Crawford and Barry Sullivan in a Universal World Premiere Movie for TV."

His first assignment was indeed a plum one: one of three segments for a pilot called *Night Gallery*, created and written by the master of television fantasy, Rod Serling.

For all his bravado in sneaking on backlots and demanding concessions from Sheinberg, Spielberg felt panic when he first met one of his idols, the creator of a favorite television show from his youth, Rod Serling of *The Twilight Zone*.

The chain-smoking writer-producer immediately put the twenty-one-year-old novice at ease. "Rod was the most positive guy in the entire production company," Spielberg later recalled. "He was a great, energetic slaphappy guy who gave me a fantastic pep talk about how he predicted that the entire movie industry was about to change because of young people like myself getting the breaks."

The crew was just as encouraging as the creator of the series. No one seemed to mind being ordered about by a pubescent looking director. "I expected hostility when I started on this," Spielberg said at the time. "But no one seemed to think it was unusual. Nobody called me, 'Hey, kid.' As a matter of fact, the older people on the set were the first to accept me. I guess they figured that someone up there thought I was good enough for the job, then that was enough for them."

Not all his elders were so encouraging. In fact, probably the oldest person on the set didn't like being directed by an adolescent.

In 1969, the year the *Night Gallery* pilot was shot, its star, Joan Crawford, was in her sixty-fifth year and, according to her daughter Christina's memoir, *Mommie Dearest*, in the latter stages of alcoholism, quaffing water glasses filled with 100 proof Stolichnaya vodka.

Her film career all but over, the workaholic actress still needed to get in front of the camera, and like so many movie stars of yesteryear, TV became her living graveyard, the place where she breathed her last, professionally speaking.

For his first directing assignment, Spielberg found himself stuck with one of the most obstreperous stars in Hollywood. Crawford was cast in the middle segment, "Eyes," of the *Night Gallery* trilogy pilot. She played a wealthy blind woman who is given a chance to regain her sight for twelve hours. All she has to do is find a donor. She bribes a down-on-his-luck drunk (Tom Bosley) to surrender his corneas in return for \$12,000.

The operation is a success, but just as Crawford regains her sight, everything goes black. The onset of her vision is also the beginning of a citywide electrical blackout. Her expensive operation, which only grants her half a day's worth of sight, is a total waste. Stumbling in the dark, she crashes through the glass door of her penthouse and falls to her death.

Spielberg has only fond memories of the first star he ever directed. "I never saw her drunk on the set," he told me years later, contrary to *Mommie Dearest's* claim that the star was a full-blown alcoholic by that time.

The book by her daughter, Christina, also claims Crawford was grossly insulted by being assigned a twenty-one-year-old director who looked like a teenager. She apparently managed to hide her distaste from her director, however. Spielberg fondly recalled, "Directing Joan Crawford was like

pitching to Hank Aaron your first time in the game. [She] treated me like I had been directing fifty years. She was great. But I did an awful job.”

Crawford didn't share his enthusiasm for their collaboration. Confirming the *Mommie Dearest* account, other sources say Crawford campaigned to get him fired, but Rod Serling went to bat for his young protege. Failing to get him fired, Crawford threw herself into the project with the professionalism that had kept her working for more than half a century.

A method actress, she invited the director to come to her penthouse apartment in New York and greeted him at the door blindfolded; she was getting in character.

“She was going to be playing a blind person, and she went lurching around the apartment. I was terrified. When I suggested we go to lunch, she took off her blindfold and said, ‘I’m not going to be seen in public with you. People will think you’re my child.’ ”

Despite such put-downs, Spielberg insists, “She was very good to me, very firm, but very kind. She called her Miss Crawford, and she insisted on calling me Mr. Spielberg. I asked her to call me Steve but she wouldn't. She knew I was just a scared kid, and she was setting an example—of courtesy, and yes, of respect—for the rest of the cast and crew to follow. Once she knew I had done my homework—I had my storyboards right there with me every minute—she treated me as if I was The Director. Which, of course, I was, but at that time she knew a helluva lot more about directing than I did.”

They even had creative differences, although not violent enough to cause either the temperamental star or the neophyte director to stomp off the set. “Miss Crawford and I had our first argument,” he told *TV Guide* at the time. “It wasn't really much of a disagreement, a little thing over punching up a scene. It's a pleasure discussing such a thing with a woman like that.”

Ultimately, Crawford did more than overcome her aversion to being directed by somebody who looked as though he were still going through puberty.

She may even have felt gratitude when he helped her with Serling's complicated dialogue. The creator of the show believed his dialogue was written in stone, and woe to anyone, even a star, who defied Crawford's magnitude, who dared digress from the script.

Whether it was age or alcoholism, Crawford kept forgetting her lines. Finally, Spielberg agreed to have strategically placed cue cards scattered all over the set within her eyesight but out of camera range.

By the time their collaboration was over, it seems Crawford was Spielberg's biggest fan. Or so an eyewitness to the production insists.

The reporter, the venerable Shirley Eder of the *Detroit Free Press*, remembered her visit to the backlot at Universal: “Joan grabbed me and said, ‘Go interview that *kid* because he's going to be the biggest director of all time.’ ”

Years later, at a press junket to promote his film *Hook*, an elderly Eder reminded Spielberg of his visit to the set of *Night Gallery*.

Underneath the rabbinical beard that now covers most of his face, Spielberg looked as though he might be blushing. Grimacing, he said to Eder, “You already told me that story . . . and I thought you were crazy.”

Despite his star's enthusiasm, Spielberg wasn't bullish on his first professional directing effort. And for once he wasn't being self-deprecating when he claimed he did an “awful job” on *Night Gallery*.

The producer of his segment had to reshoot part of the director's work. “I was so traumatized. The pressure of that show was too much for me. I decided to take some time off, and Sid [Sheinberg] had the guts to give me a leave of absence,” he said.

For all its problems, the segment of *Night Gallery* he directed remains a treasure trove for film

historians and movie buffs because it contains the signature style of filmmaking he would later perfect in his blockbusters and masterpiece: the use of wide-angle lenses, lots of dolly and crane shots, and dramatic lighting to maximize the overall visual impact.

The zoom lens had been invented only a few years before, and it was still all the rage, especially on television, where a zoom was cheaper than expensive dolly shots and the tracks that had to be laid down to accommodate them. Spielberg bucked the trend and avoided zoom shots, however, using instead complex tracking shots in which the camera moved toward the actor rather than zooming in. Spielberg also employed some fancy cutting, and one scene was a homage to a similar quick-cut sequence in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Actually, it wasn't just the *Night Gallery* experience that temporarily soured the young filmmaker on filmmaking. After directing the pilot, he had spent several months writing three screenplays, all of which were rejected by his mentor, Sheinberg.

"I was in a despondent, comatose state and told Sid I wanted a leave of absence," he said.

During a yearlong sabbatical from Universal, he wrote his first feature, which was to become *The Sugarland Express*, and two other screenplays, one of which he sold to the superhot producing team of Richard Zanuck and David Brown. The film, called *Ace Eli and Roger of the Skies*, never made it to the screen, but the importance of the Zanuck-Brown connection can't be underestimated. A few years later the two powerful men would drop, at Spielberg's request, a director assigned to one of their films and give the job to Spielberg. The title of this story: *Jaws*.

But that triumph was six years away. In the meantime, after a year away from Universal, Spielberg found himself chomping at the bit, anxious to get away from the typewriter and in front of a camera, any camera, any medium, even television, even though *Night Gallery* had been such a traumatic and unsatisfying experience.

"I suffocated in the freedom," he said about his year off. "I needed to work, and I came back to Universal and said, 'I'll do anything.' But no one would hire me."

Universal did take him back, and he landed an episode of *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, which would be the first of seven shows he directed for the studio's television arm.

The *Welby* episode was titled "The Daredevil Gesture." It focused on a teenager suffering from hemophilia who was determined to prove he was just as fit as his friends by attempting a dangerous rescue on a class field trip. (Shades of Spielberg's Boy Scout misadventures!) Dr. Welby (Robert Young) as usual saved the day—and the hemophiliac's life. The episode is noteworthy because it championed the rights of the disabled long before such causes became politically fashionable.

A year after his unpleasant encounter with *Night Gallery*, Spielberg apparently had forgotten the experience enough to take a stab at another segment of the anthology show. He directed the first half of a two-part episode, a comedy-drama called "Make Me Laugh."

Godfrey Cambridge played a failed stand-up comic desperate to find an appreciative audience. He meets a sad-sack genie, played by comedian Jackie Vernon, who grants him his wish. Cambridge becomes irresistible to audiences. Every word out of his mouth makes people burst into giggles. As in the case of many genie-in-a-bottle stories, the wish becomes a curse. No matter what Cambridge says, no matter how serious, people crack up.

Suicidal, Cambridge throws himself in front of a car and dies. The segment ends, grotesquely, with onlookers laughing their heads off at the corpse!

Due to studio politics, a supporting actor was replaced by another actor, and some original scenes had to be reshot. Spielberg was not asked to do the reshooting, however. He was replaced by Jeannine Szwarc. Ironically, in a case of history repeating itself, seven years later Szwarc would direct the sequel to *Jaws*.

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