

Jean Shepherd talks about Hollywood

(Ed. Note: Jean Shepherd is one of America's best-loved humorists and authors whose new television series "Jean Shepherd's America" will premiere on public television in June. A 60-minute movie of his, "The Star-Crossed Romance of Josephine Cosnowski" appears tonight on American Playhouse at 9 on Channel 13. It is the third of his trilogy of a teenager growing up in the 1950s in mid-America; the first was "The Phantom of the Open Hearth" and the second, "The Great American Fourth of July and Other Disasters.")

BY JEAN SHEPHERD

From the very first day after "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash" was published, the first of a long line of advisory types remarked, "When is it gonna be a movie?" They are the same sort who are always helpfully pointing out, "Say, you're getting a little thin on top there, have you noticed?", as if you were not painfully and acutely aware of your slow disintegration. Of course, these helpful comments are always delivered in a tone of faint amusement laced with phony concern. It takes the best way to deal with these boobs is to take up the cudgels immediately and counter-attack.

"Glad you mentioned that my hair is getting thin, Claude. I hadn't noticed. Incidentally, I've been meaning to tell you that I believe your teeth are going bad, old pal."

He/she instantly lapses into a hurt silence, which is better for all concerned. Anyway, all my friends gathered around on publication day and instead of shouting such things as "Boy, your first novel, that's really something!", or "Hail to the successor of Flaubert!", no indeed, they seemed to feel that writing a novel was somehow an admission of artistic failure, that the purpose of a real writer is to see his stuff on the screen.

How the times have changed. I remember reading a letter from F. Scott Fitzgerald to his editor Maxwell Perkins apologizing for going out to Hollywood to write a screenplay: "Sorry, Max, but Zelda's pregnant and money is short, so"

Today, "going out to Hollywood to write a screenplay", would be considered the apex of a footless career spent fooling around with novels. Oh well. To add insult to injury, once your stuff is on the screen, few people are aware that anybody wrote it at all. We all know that Francis Ford Coppola gave birth to "The Godfather", aided by Al Pacino. Mario Puzo? Who he?



All-American photo album

Jean Shepherd, the popular humorist, who talks about writing novels versus screenplays in the accompanying article, is the author of "The Star-Crossed Romance of Josephine Cosnowski" on American Playhouse tonight at 9 p.m. on Channel 13. It is the story of a teen-aged boy, Ralph, and his frightening tussle with a beautiful girl bent on marriage and her big brothers. It takes place in the 1950s in a steelmill town in Illinois. Gathered around the Thanksgiving table in the scene above are from left: Peter Kowanko, Jay Inc, Barbara Bolton and George Coe.

Maybe one of those guys who got shot in the first scene, by the fruit stand. It was Paul Newman and his pal Robert Redford who got together one night and knocked out the devilishly clever "The Sting". How many of you know who wrote it? Aha, I thought so.

In the good old days it was writers who could fire directors. Today, a director feels he is entitled to can anybody up to and including the president of the company that is bankrolling his current sixty-sever million dollar turkey. They are today's version of the omnipotent golden Pashas of the Arabian Nights.

The public, on the other hand, the Great Unwashed, are concerned only with "Who's in it?" what current anorexic goddess is "playing" the lead. Did she finally divorce the Italian pop? Will she really marry after bearing three children by two different directors and one producer? Excitement mounts.

Or, which hollow-eyed, five-foot-two-inch screen hero will you be fortunate to get, at a three-million dollar salary for eight weeks of fitful, truculent "work"?

To paraphrase Simon and Garfunkle, where have you gone Clark Gable, now that we need you?

Can you see Dustin Hoffman carrying Scarlett O'Hara up that vast staircase at Tara? The midr boggles.

However, as a writer and actor, I've always been ambivalent toward the screen. On the one hand, I have truly cringed at what incredible carnage has been perpetrated on many superb novels by barely literate "adaptors", all for the sake of satisfying a supposedly dumb public. Then, conversely, I have, I must admit, at times truly enjoyed what the film world has done with inferior novels. It works both ways. For example, "Peyton Place" the movie was far better than the novel from which it was made. Also true of "Valley of the Dolls."

I have had my temptations. Shortly after "In God We Trust" hit the best seller list, I was contacted by a major studio bearing a large, juicy offering. It turned out they wanted to cast DEan Jones and Suzanne Pleshette as The Old Man and Mon, set it in contemporary Pasadena, and make a "family" fun movie for the Readers' Digest trade.

When I explained that the whole point of my novels was the struggles of a family existing in the midst of industrial wastes, and that my work

was sardonic satire on their life and times, I was told off by the bright, chipper 23-year-old vice president.

He said that I "didn't understand films" and that what I proposed was a "downer". It wasn't hard to say "No thanks", not hard at all.

Then came my next novel, "Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories and Other Disasters" and more dumb offers. But times had changed. The days of "The Love Bug" were on the wane. Students were blowing up libraries. There was fire in the streets. All of a sudden people noticed the environment and a few began to reread my books and found that the villain in my work was in fact those belching Open Hearths, those fragrant refineries, and the grey dust of modern life.

I was not and never have been writing Nostalgia, but comedies of struggles and dreams, blasted hopes and small victories, the very antithesis of one of the banes of modern life, the sickness of Nostalgia. The foolish belief that there was once a "simpler" time.

How simple was it to get blown away at Bull Run, or shot down in flames over Italy? Times were never simple, because Life itself has never been a simple proposition. A cave

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man peering out at a mysterious world full of lightning and instant death did not find his times "simple."

When my trusty director and friend Fred Barzyk got together with me on the first production for American Playhouse, I outlined a trilogy, but insisted on absolute control, since my work is comedic and there is nothing more personal than Comedy, with the possible exception of of Sex.

The late James Broderick read the first script and immediately understood what The Old Man was all about. Incidentally, that character is the pivotal role in my work. Barbara Bolton was the perfect Mom -- harassed, brave, a dreamer tied down by Brillo pads and sulking kids.

"The Phantom of the Open Hearth" was a huge success on public television. It won awards in such diverse countries as Italy, where it was judged superior to the mauch vaunted "American Graffiti." A year and a half later, Jimmy Broderick brilliantly performed The Old Man again in "The Great American Fourth of July and Other Disasters". Ralph was played by the emerging Matt Dillon. Both believe those roles were the best things they have ever done.

Incidentally, both those films were shot as movies, not taped but done in genuine filmic style. I write films, not TV comedies.

Finally, we get to the current and last chapter of the trilogy of our little struggling family, "The Star-Crossed Romance of Josephine Cosnowski", which brings our hero Ralph to his last year of high school. Set at Thanksgiving, Ralph discovers the quicksand of Love, and barely escapes with his life. The Old Man, now well played by George Coe, who stepped in after Jimmy's sudden death, has a traumatic love affair of his own

which blows up in his face and finally convinces him that his life is permanently off the track.

The film took the Silver Medal at the International Film Festival at Lincoln Center recently, and actually was the most difficult of the three to make, for a number of technical reasons.

Together, these three stories form a sort of filmic novel. We are proud of them -- myself, Fred Barzyk, our associate producers Olivia Tappan and Leigh Brown.