

Adults Only

From *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to *Henry and June*, director Philip Kaufman has made eclectic, challenging films for a grown-up audience. His latest, *Quills*, about the last days of the Marquis de Sade, is among his best work

In a cold London suburb a little over a year ago, I saw the Marquis de Sade, his fingertips bandaged and his clothes covered in writing, dance gaily on a long dining table to the cheers of lunatics. Actually, I saw this three or four times, one after the other; at least once, I watched the marquis's brazen jig only on the small screen of a video monitor, over the shoulder of my friend Philip Kaufman, who was directing a movie called *Quills*. The sound was live every time, though: On each take, the lunatics—i.e., the actors playing Sade's fellow inmates of the Charenton asylum—were deafening in their enthusiasm. Movie sets inevitably have a hallucinatory quality: Unreal events happen before your eyes repeatedly, like obsessions, each one bizarrely isolated from the narrative context that would (presumably) make sense of it.

And when you venture outside the soundstage, the experience doesn't necessarily get less weird. In the commissary of Pinewood Studios a bit later, Michael Caine—who plays Dr. Royer-Collard, Charenton's draconian overseer and Sade's most implacable adversary—eats lunch in a black frock coat and an elaborately ruffled white shirt; Geoffrey Rush, who plays the Divine Marquis, saunters through in his shabby dandy's costume and his moldy-looking wig, and when he stops to discuss a line with the screenwriter, Doug Wright, I notice that little strips of cloth still dangle from his fingers. (Sade, deprived of writing materials, has been using his blood for ink.) As we head back to the set, my wife and I, our friend Elizabeth Nicholls and Phil's son, Peter (who is one of the film's producers), occasionally pause to look at the posters lining the



■ **STARING DOWN THE CAMERA**
After a seven-year hiatus, director Philip Kaufman has completed his eleventh film, *Quills*, about the last debauched days of the infamous Marquis de Sade.

corridors of Pinewood, where James Bond movies are shot. Suddenly, as if in a vision, a strangely familiar-looking elderly man walks toward us: He is Desmond Llewelyn, who has played the gadgetry wizard Q in every 007 picture since *From Russia With Love*. (Sadly, Llewelyn was killed in a car crash just a couple of months after we saw him.)

I'm reminded of that stimulating and slightly disorienting day at Pinewood when, a year later, I sit down with Kaufman in his San Francisco office and listen to him talk about filmmaking as a kind of dream. "When you can live in the dream," he says, "you can be out of your time; you can suspend life; you can experience all this sensuality and fun. It's a privilege." And later he says, "I just like that feeling in my life, being able to collaborate with my friends. Peter and I are together every day [in the

North Beach offices of their production company, Walrus & Associates], and, as you can see, things are pretty egalitarian around here. What matters is keeping the spirit afloat."

It's rare to hear an American director describe so rapturously what he does—especially one who, like Kaufman, has been making movies for almost forty years, has endured more than his share of ignorance, interference and outright neglect at the hands of Hollywood studio executives, and has every reason to feel weary and cynical. But his enthusiasm for filmmaking is undiminished and unabashed, and in the course of our conversation he keeps topping himself with ever more lyrical formulations of the pleasures of the process. "There's a kind of poetic quality to the state of mind you get into when you're making a movie," he says at one point. "And it's there at every stage, through the writing, the shooting and the editing. Everything becomes vivified, and I feel excited and alert. For me, the fun is in the learning experience, in figuring out the vocabulary you need for each movie. Every time it's like traveling to a new country, almost like a pilgrimage. It's the way I used to feel when I went to my high school in Chicago back in the '50s, and there were a hundred funny, bright,



talented guys there, so going to school was actually exciting."

That last sentence might seem a tad anticlimactic—a sudden plunge earthward from the rhetorical heights he had ascended to. But the abrupt alternation of the exalted and the mundane has been one of the hallmarks of Kaufman's cinematic style, too, right from his first film, *Goldstein* (1965; codirected by Benjamin Manaster), in which a kind of cranky Old Testament prophet rises out of Lake Michigan and interacts with a motley crew of crooks, hipsters and artists in Chicago. Kaufman and his cohorts saw themselves as part of an American New Wave that consisted of John Cassavetes, Shirley Clarke, Curtis Harrington and a few others, but, he says, some of the soberer underground-film types were put off by *Goldstein's* mixture of mysticism and goofy



■ KAUFMAN'S WORLD OF FILM The director's eclectic visions, clockwise from top: A whaler taking refuge with an Eskimo tribe faces a murderous polar bear in *The White Dawn* (1974); extraterrestrial pod people visit the earth in Kaufman's 1978 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; Lou Gilbert as a Jewish prophet in Kaufman's first film, *Goldstein* (1965).



humor. (Many of the actors were members of the Second City improvisational troupe.) "We thought that movies could be serious and not serious at the same time—that maybe there's a higher seriousness. The artists I've always liked, from Lenny Bruce to Philip Roth, are both incredibly funny and deadly serious."

If you don't believe in that higher seriousness—in an art whose dedication to exploring ideas does not preclude a healthy appreciation of both humor and sex—you're likely to find Phil Kaufman's movies puzzling. They're not for formalists or purists or auteurist critics who require a recog-

nizable stylistic signature in every example of a filmmaker's work. In the ten pictures that have followed *Goldstein*, Kaufman has taken on an impressive variety of subjects and genres: *Frank's Greatest Adventure* (1967; retitled *Fearless Frank* by its distributor) is what Kaufman calls "a pop-art movie," about a hick who goes to Chicago and becomes a comic-book-style superhero; *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (1972) is a playful tragicomic Western about the Jesse James-Cole Younger gang, in which Jesse is a religious fanatic and Cole is a sort of crackpot

visionary, enamored of the very mechanical innovations that are making him and his kind anachronisms; *The White Dawn* (1974), about late-nineteenth-century American whalers lost in the Arctic and rescued by Eskimos, is both a stirring adventure yarn and an idiosyncratic culture-clash comedy.

Kaufman really began to hit his stride in 1978, with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, a vigorous reimagining of Don Siegel's 1956 B-movie horror classic. The director and the screenwriter, W. D. Richter, relocated the story—about pods from outer space replacing human beings with mindless, docile dop-pelgängers—to San Francisco, where individuality is prized and eccentricity is actively cultivated. It's a genuinely scary movie, but it's also an affectionate satire on the culture of the Bay Area, where Kaufman, his wife, Rose, and their son had moved a few years earlier after an uncomfortable sojourn in Los Angeles. "L.A. has always made me nervous," he says. "It's so much about ambition and so much about competition. Everything's informed by the idea of film as an industry. Hollywood was a lot more interesting when it was sort of like a Barbary Coast, when people went there as outlaws, as outcasts. That's the feeling I liked about San Francisco, though it's losing that a little bit now, too, with the congestion and the tourism and the whole dot-com phenomenon."

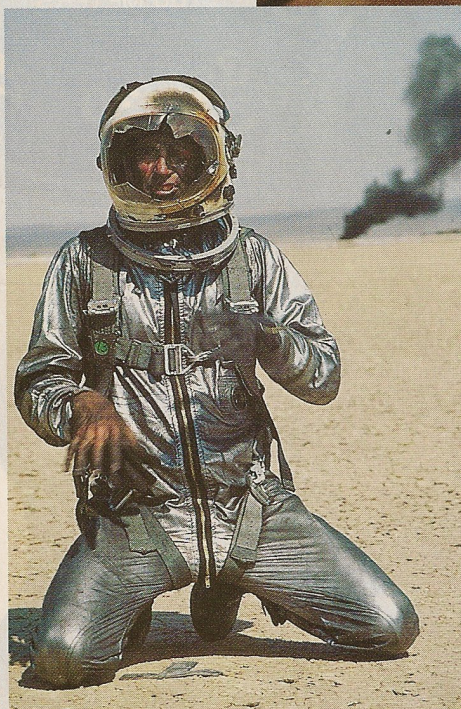
Body Snatchers was a hit, and although his next picture, *The Wanderers* (1979), from Richard Price's novel about teenage gangs in the Bronx in the early '60s, was no less complexly entertaining, it didn't sell many tickets in this country; exhibitors were frightened of the subject because another gang movie, Walter Hill's *The Warriors*, had triggered violence in some theaters a few months before. (*The Wanderers* did well in Europe, though, and has become an extremely popular film on cable television here.) It's a rambunctiously funny movie about a vanished subculture, and in telling this story Kaufman finds a new and more expressive use for the comic-book hyperbole he experimented with in *Frank's Greatest Adventure*. And *The Wanderers* ends on a characteristically ambivalent

grace note, the hero traveling far from his home ground into the foreign country of Greenwich Village, where he hears what he has begun to suspect, that the times they are a-changin'. The moment contains both panic and an exhilarating sense of possibility: the realization that adolescent bravado and exuberance won't take you very far into adulthood, mixed with the curiosity to discover what will.

Although Kaufman made wonderful movies in the '70s, he's rarely included in discussions of the movie-brat generation of Spielberg, Scorsese, De Palma, Coppola, Schrader, Lucas et alia: Peter Biskind's tabloid history, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, doesn't mention him at all. (He should be grateful.) Partly, I suppose, that's because Phil's slightly older than those guys—he was born in 1936—and it shows in his work: Brash as his movies sometimes are, they are decidedly not bratty, and they were never just about style or technique. And although "excitement" and "energy" are among his core values, the key concept



■ TIME TRAVELING Clockwise from top: *Henry and June* (1990) starred Uma Thurman as the muse to controversial writers Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin; Daniel Day-Lewis and Juliette Binoche between the sheets in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988); Sam Shepard crashes to earth in *The Right Stuff* (1983).



that keeps bobbing up in his conversation is the importance of being an *adult*. In high school and later at the University of Chicago (where he studied history and met Rose), "We all had a real desire to be grown-ups," he says. "Bogart was a grown-up. It's no accident that Albert Camus tried to look like him. But our modern heroes seem to carry their adolescence on and on to the grave: HERE LIES A BOY."

This deeply held conviction, however, doesn't prevent Kaufman from appreciating the boyish high spirits of Gordon Cooper (Dennis Quaid) in *The Right Stuff* (1983) or the waifish sincerity of Tereza (Juliette Binoche) in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), even when these qualities are

juxtaposed with, respectively, the rugged manliness of a Chuck Yeager (Sam Shepard) and the worldly irony of a Sabina (Lena Olin). Those two films—a public epic and a private one—are Kaufman's longest (each runs about [continued on page 222])

[continued from page 218] three hours), most expansive and most volatile, and are therefore, I think, also his best. *The Right Stuff*, adapted from Tom Wolfe's sprawling, hyperkinetic best-seller about the origins of American manned space exploration, shudders and lurches like a jet approaching the sound barrier, so hell-bent on crossing the threshold into the unknown that it barely notices the vibrations. The movie, mixing up tones recklessly, acknowledges American history as the bumpy, exciting ride we all know it is, and never loses speed. Kaufman portrays the Mercury program as both a Cold War con game and a genuine triumph of chutzpah and imagination. (He seems to like the astronauts more than Wolfe does.) His *Right Stuff* might be an illustration of F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous maxim "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."

That test is one Hollywood movies generally refuse to take, because there's no proven way to cheat on it. Maybe that's why movies that don't deliver a simple message—preferably one written in large-block capitals—strike us as being somehow European. And that may also be why Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, derived from the novel by the Czech Milan Kundera, fared better in the art houses than *The Right Stuff* did in the multiplexes. *Unbearable* is a prankish sex comedy that turns, after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, into a melancholy reverie on freedom, exile and loss. Having stripped away Kundera's philosophical musings, Kaufman gives us a world in which the important elements are love, sex, friendship, jokes, politics, art and animals. These are,

as far as I can tell, the things that matter to Phil Kaufman in his own life, and I think it's downright American of him to cram so much of each of them into a single movie.

And they are also the components of an adult life, in Kaufman's sense: not a dull existence, but one that enables you to find the excitement and the energy of your youth in more and more places. During our conversation in San Francisco—of the many we've had in the past ten years, this is the only one I've been rude enough to tape-record—I encourage Phil to talk about his family background and his education, and it strikes me, as he reminisces about his grandparents, his parents, his high school and college friends, his wandering postcollegiate years as a young husband and father and his early attempts at writing and filmmaking, that he's probably pretty much the same guy now that he was forty or fifty years ago. I recognize him in his stories. And it strikes me, too, that one characteristic common to artists I like—to people I like, come to think of it—is that they

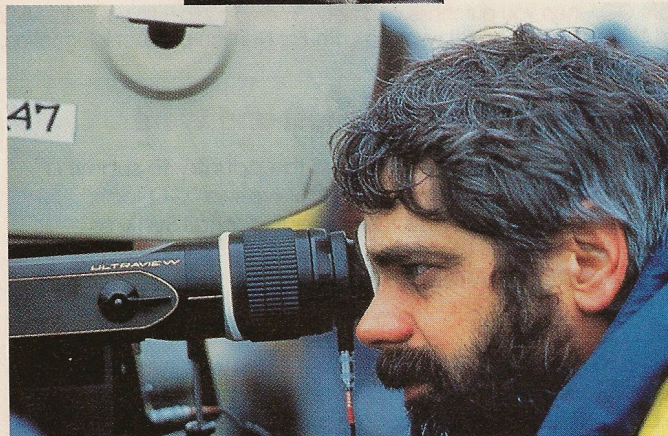
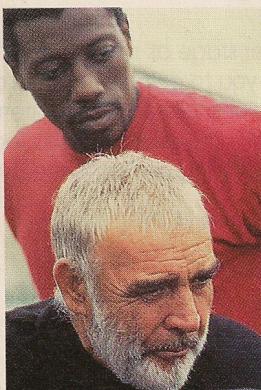
understand the value of remaining continuous with themselves, of retaining a core of identity through changing circumstances. In some paradoxical way, that stubborn impulse makes it easier, not harder, to accept and to learn from—and even to revel in—the bewildering variety and maddening contradictions of human experience. There's pleasure in the process of figuring it all out, of adding to your vocabulary, and you never want to get to the end of it.

"What we're talking about," Phil says, "is trying to know as much as we can, and we're living in a world of know-it-alls." Since *Unbearable*, the know-it-all world hasn't been too congenial to Kaufman's exploratory, intellectually curious approach to filmmaking. *Henry and June* (1990), a respectful but slyly ironic treatment of Anaïs Nin's strange relationships with Henry Miller and his wife, June, was tepidly reviewed and flopped at the box office. It was the first movie to be rated NC-17, but that rating, which Kaufman and others had hoped would remove the stigma of the X from "grown-up" movies, has instead become just a stigma by another name. His next picture, the bracingly intelligent neo-noir thriller *Rising Sun* (1993), made money but also generated widely reported accusations of racism from some Japanese American groups. "That really stung,"

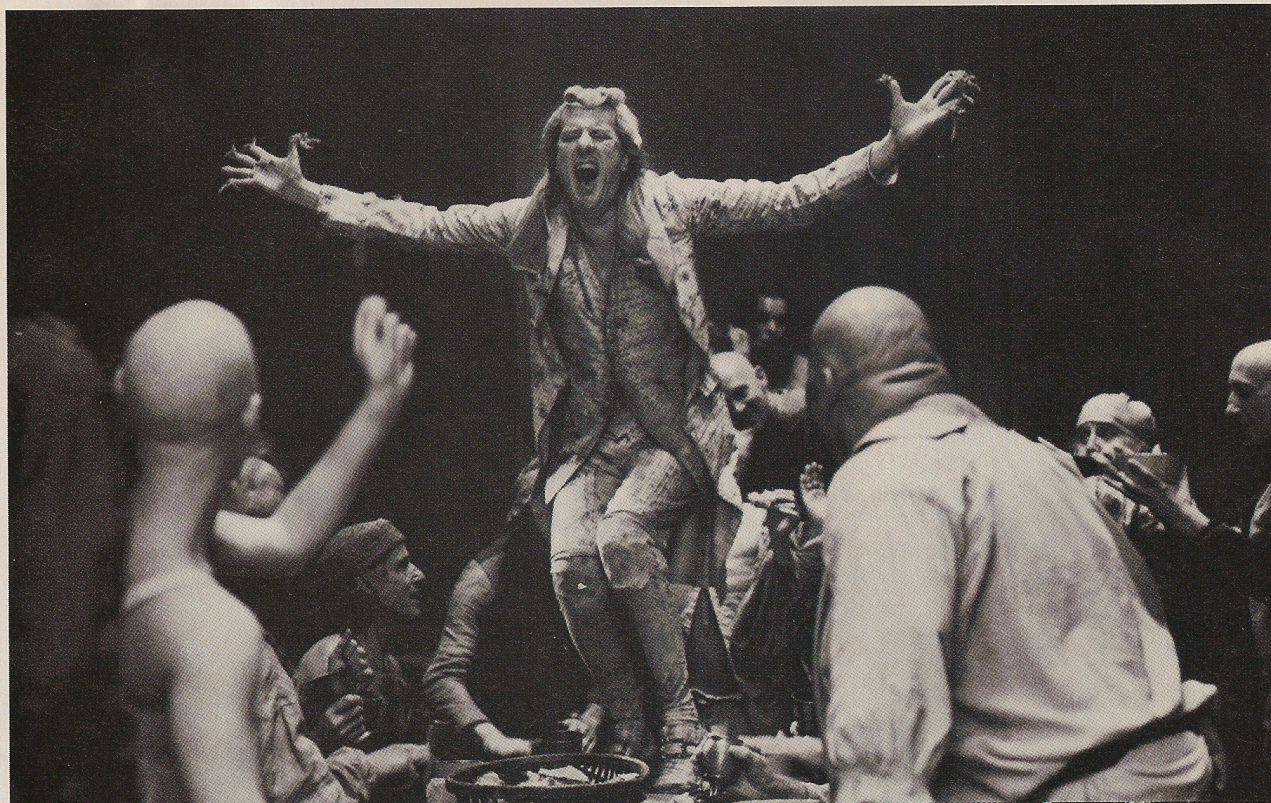
Kaufman says, particularly since he had scrupulously excised the most inflammatory elements of the Michael Crichton novel on which the film was based and had employed dozens of Asians and Asian-Americans in the cast and crew. "A few of the people who led the charge were actually people who had wanted us to hire them. I guess the movie wouldn't have been racist if we'd given them jobs."

The past seven years have been, he says, "a tough period," during which he worked on several projects "that were absolutely going to be made," including adaptations of Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* and John Grisham's *The Runaway Jury*—and then had the plug pulled on every one of them. *Quills*, improbably, came in through the transom ("I'd just about given up hope for something like that"): a script by Doug Wright based on his own play about the Marquis de Sade's desperate attempts to keep writing his cynical, scabrous erotic fiction during the last years of his confinement in Charenton. In Wright, Kaufman found an ideal collaborator: "Doug was willing to go to any extreme to make the movie I wanted to make. And I wanted to make a picture he was happy with, too." Kaufman wound up keeping the writer on the set for the full four months of shooting, calling on him constantly for changes. "I like the idea of the marquis getting up every morning to face the blank parchment and scribbling and chortling to himself, and I have the feeling that's sort of the way Doug writes, too."

The result is amazing. The movie preserves the play's fiendish wit, its satiric fervor on the subjects of censorship and institutional hypocrisy and even a handful of its Grand Guignol



■ **HEAVY HITTERS** Wesley Snipes and Sean Connery costarred in the 1993 political thriller *Rising Sun*; Kaufman behind the lens.



theatrical effects. The tone and the dramatic emphases, however, have been altered to make room, in the Kaufman manner, for a richer, more unstable mixture of elements—to allow Wright's brilliant ironies to collide not only with each other but also with some of the simpler human emotions, and combust in tragedy. In casting the roles of the younger characters—Madeleine, who is Sade's favorite laundress as well as his accomplice in smuggling his writing out of Charenton, and the Abbe de Coulmier, the asylum's idealistic director—Kaufman chose Kate Winslet and Joaquin Phoenix, both of them actors who can seem open and almost guileless before the camera and whose beauty only the most dedicated sadist could enjoy seeing violated. By placing these romantic figures in the crossfire of Sade and Royer-Collard's emphatically unromantic battle of wits, Kaufman's *Quills* hugely complicates our understanding of the philosophical issues at stake in the story. By the end, you feel as if the drama's meanings had been written in blood.

No wonder Phil Kaufman is waxing poetic about the joys of filmmaking. He has just had the sort of stimulating creative fun that he has been deprived of for seven long years. He's made a terrific picture for under \$14 million. And, to his shock, he hasn't even had to go to war with the ratings board: It gave *Quills* an R without asking for a single cut. So his life, his unapologetically adult life, seems good right now, and the advance word on *Quills* has been so strong that he might actually get to

■ **LITERARY LUNACY** Clockwise from above: Geoffrey Rush rants, raves and incites riotous behavior as the incarcerated Marquis de Sade in *Quills*; lovely laundress Madeleine (Kate Winslet) learns that reading is fundamental from the asylum's benevolent priest (Joaquin Phoenix); Madeleine and Sade steal a forbidden moment.



make another movie soon. But he's still wary, and puzzled about why making interesting movies should be so difficult. "Why do people *feel* so bad in Hollywood? I know it's true in the publishing world, too, and in magazines. We're celebrating this great economy, but there's something wrong. Is it

just that people have enough money now to cushion all those bad feelings? Wouldn't it be better if we could find our way back to a society where maybe you don't have as much money, but every job is a joy because you're, you know, part of the adventure of the times?" I'll bet he talked like that back in high school, too. (I know I did.) But it's startling to hear a grown man express his romanticism so unself-consciously—just as it's startling to see a movie about the Marquis de Sade that is faithful to its subject and yet utterly free of cynicism. When Phil Kaufman speaks about making movies and taking part in the "adventure of the times," all I can do is nod in agreement and wonder, Where do I sign up? ■

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