MY Diner WITH BARRY

Illustration by Louis A. Janesko

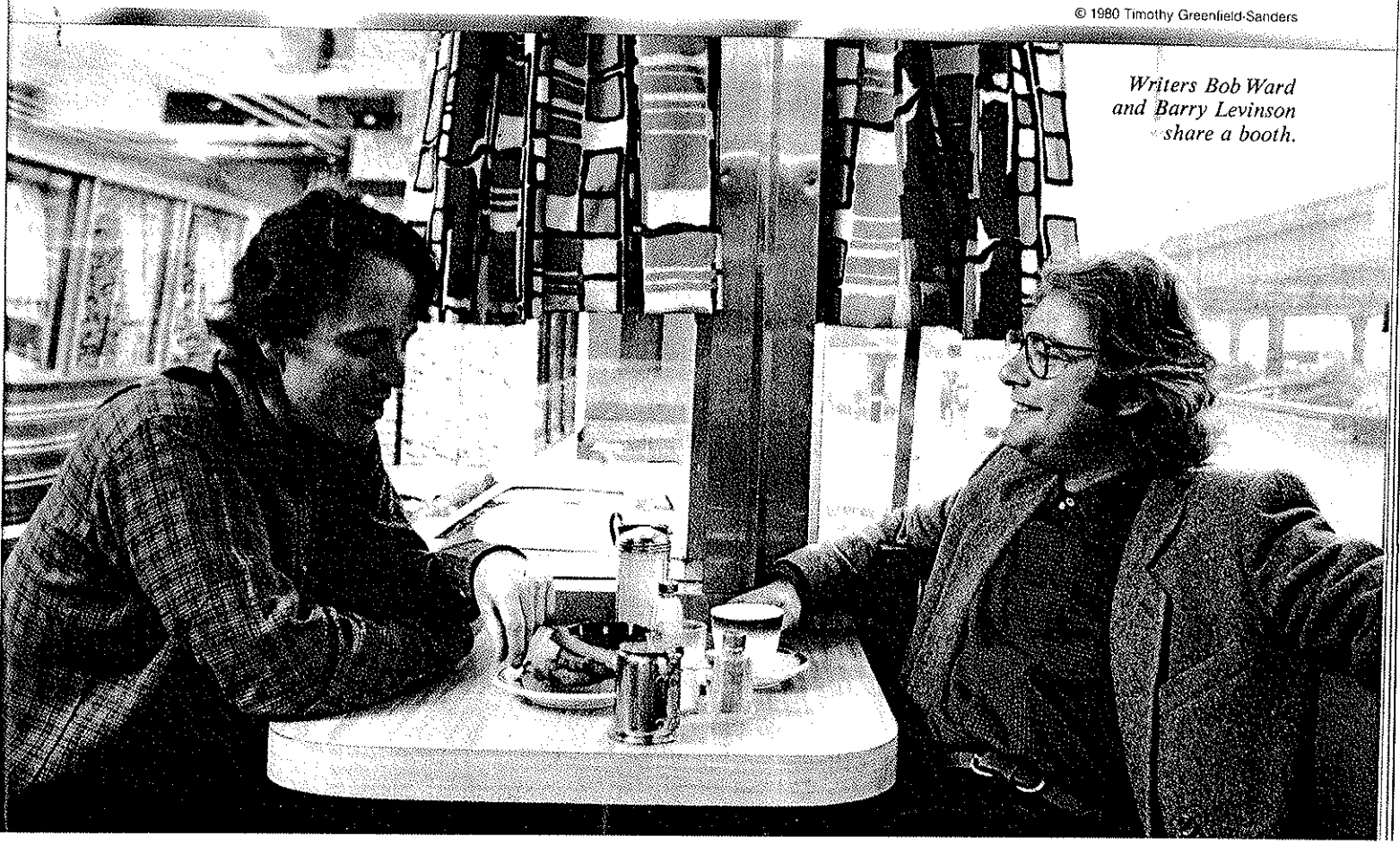
It ain't Wally Shawn and André Gregory. It's just a coupla Baltimore boys sitting around talking.

What happens when a studio astutely backs a modestly budgeted and, not incidentally, very funny comedy—the kind of picture any executive would give up his parking space to have on his release schedule—but still can't figure out how to get people to see it? In the case of MGM, the film is *Diner*, and it almost got away. Early this spring, MGM decided to "test-market" this film about growing up male in Baltimore (circa 1959) in Phoenix, a move one official later admitted "was like testing *Fiddler on the Roof* in Cairo." Worse, an early ad campaign tried to sell it to the *Animal House* crowd, even though the film's humor is generally understated and verbal. There's a lot of food consumed in *Diner*, but there are no food fights. The teenage patrons were disappointed.

Still, MGM didn't give up. "The last thing we want for *Diner*," said another source at the studio, "is for it to end up with UA Classics." MGM screened *Diner* for the New York critics, and it paid off. When it opened in New York, David Denby called it "a small American classic" and Pauline Kael hailed it as "a great period piece." Now the studio's ad campaign has begun to stress the critics' quotes, hoping to attract an older, more literate audience.

Diner has been compared to *Breaking Away*, another film about the joys and sorrows of coming of age and male camaraderie. (The films share a lead—Daniel Stern.) The boys down at the diner are a little older than the *Breaking Away* crowd—all of them are in their early twenties—but they are no less reluctant to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. Their refuge from their jobs, their girl friends, and their wives is the local diner, where they can discuss the merits of Frank Sinatra versus Johnny Mathis over a plate of French fries with gravy, a Baltimore greasy spoon specialty.

Diner is the directing debut of thirty-eight-year-old writer Barry Levinson, who grew up in Baltimore, and recalls his experiences with an equal mixture of affection and regret. His screenwriting credits include . . . *And Justice for All* (a collabora-



Writers Bob Ward and Barry Levinson share a booth.

tion with his wife, actress Valerie Curtin) and *High Anxiety* and *Silent Movie* (both written with Mel Brooks, Ron Clark, and Rudy DeLuca). Between *Diner*'s unsuccessful run in Baltimore and Washington and its New York opening, he met with screenwriter-novelist Robert Ward at Manhattan's Market Diner. Ward, who wrote the Western novel *Cattle Annie and Little Britches*, and co-wrote the screen adaptation, is at work on a novel called *Baltimore* (to be published in March 1983 by Delacorte), and is scheduled to direct his own screenplay for George Romero's Laurel Entertainment later this year. He's the same age as Levinson and also spent his adolescence in Baltimore.

The Market Diner, which Ward describes as looking like "a jukebox with seats instead of records inside," is reminiscent of Baltimore's Hillcrest Diner, the model for the setting of *Diner*'s best scenes, in which, as Ward says, "young men learn to sharpen their wits, talk about the mysteries of the opposite sex, and pass time while they wait for the magical day when they will somehow become adults." Here's a record of their conversation.

The boys of Barry Levinson's fictional Baltimore diner: Timothy Daly, Mickey Rourke, Daniel Stern, Kevin Bacon, Steve Guttenberg, and Paul Reiser.

Bob Ward: I really like this place. It's got the good chrome feel of the old Hillcrest.

Barry Levinson: You hung out there, too? It's funny we never knew one another.

Bob: Well, I actually lived across Baltimore. I came over and hung out with Jewish friends who practically lived in there. Jensky, Barry Fuller, Arnie Cohen. And Boogie. The star of your picture. He had to be modeled after Boogie Weinglas. He was a great fighter. I remember an epic battle between him and a big kid named Tattersall in front of City, our old high school.

Barry: Yeah, I saw Boogie get into a fight one night at a recreation dance. The kid pulled a knife and we were all stunned. Suddenly Boogie looks at the kid and says very coolly, "Hey, what's this, comic books?" The kid was so amazed at this movielike response that he hesitated just long enough for Boogie to knock the knife out of his hands. Very courageous. It's wild you knew him. And Jensky, too. He was like Don Rickles. Fast. He'd hit the diner and put down about fifty guys in two minutes.

Bob: Yeah, he was mean. But lovable. I think you got that in your picture. When I saw it in Washington, people loved it. They were cheering afterwards. I thought it caught that time in Baltimore beautifully.

Barry: Well, I just wish the studio had given us some ads. I mean, there was nothing. It was very tough.

Bob: Same thing happened to *Cattle Annie and Little Britches*. Got great reviews and Universal just let it die. Very disturbing.

Barry: You wrote that? That's a picture with great reviews. I never even got a chance to see it. You know what the great irony of the movie business is? They scream, "Pictures cost too much!" But when you bring it in for a good price, in *Diner*'s case, five million dollars, ultimately the distributors don't care about it.

Bob: Yeah, but I have hopes for *Diner*. It really captures something not only about Baltimore but about America at that time. I mean in a realer way than, say, *American Graffiti*. Not as idealized.

Barry: Aren't you doing a book about Baltimore now?

Bob: Yeah, it's about current Baltimore. It concerns three close friends and a child, and their mixed reactions to their city's becoming a trendy place. It's a book about friendship, too, and how much you owe the past.

Barry: That sounds like my obsession. I can't let Baltimore go. It's a place like no other. Gritty and real, you know. . .

Bob: But you're on the West Coast now. How did you get from our old city to Hollywood?

Barry: You know, growing up in Baltimore, you don't really think you're ever going to get to be an adult. I used to think I was just going to get an allowance until I died. But I finally went to school in D.C., at American University. I worked as an assistant director at WTOP-TV while I was there. I was not your highly motivated student. I had this wild job there, putting in the commercials for "The Late Show." Later, in the promotion department, I wrote stuff like, "Tonight on 'Perry Mason': The Case of the Scarlet Woman." My grades suffered but I never cared. I liked to let them get as low as possible and then see how high a grade I would have to get to pass. But it was tiring. Then I moved on to the morning news and I had to get up at four. One of my jobs was to do the traffic report, but I'd oversleep, so on the way to work I'd just make it up.

Bob: You're kidding! That's great! Maybe Vietnam and El Salvador have been handled the same way.

Barry: Yeah, well, you know the traffic never changes. "A little congestion on Wisconsin Avenue. Flowing smoothly on Connecticut." I loved it.

Bob: Working at a TV station must have given you a good sense of film. Watching all those late shows.

Barry: It did. When I made the move to L.A., I knew I wanted to do films. I tried acting school, and that was fun. Then I had a partner, Craig Nelson, and we got a job on a local television show. The Lohman and Barkley show. I was very lucky. They needed two guys who would write and perform on the show. Because it was local, we got to do all kinds of things. We had a skit called "Doctors and Vikings." Doctors would talk to each other, and every once in a while a Viking would walk through. We also did another skit, which didn't work quite as well, called "Lawyers and Pigs."

We thought it would be funny to have guys dressed like lawyers in pinstriped suits, spouting legalese and carrying pigs—piglets really—around with them. You know, never mention the fact. Just have the pigs there. Well, the prop guy got things mixed up and brought us fifty- and sixty-pound hogs! We had to carry them around and the hogs got nervous and started peeing all over the stage. It was really wild.

Waitress: You two guys gonna order anything? Or is this a social visit?

Bob: We're creating a great cloud of public relations for this restaurant. OK, gimme some fries.

Barry: And a cherry coke.

Bob: Good Baltimore lunch food. It sounds like you've had some fun out West, but I know it must have been tough breaking into films.

Barry: Oh, sure. You have to take a lot of meetings that don't work out. My favorite was with a studio guy. I was pitching him a movie idea, and halfway through he says to me, "Barry, that's great. You talk to your people and I'll talk to mine and we'll have a meeting next week." So I said, "Solid," and I walked outside. Then I said to myself, "Wait a minute. Just who are my people? I mean, I don't have any people." You know what I'm saying?

Bob: God, yes. The naked writer. I had a meeting last year. An agent told me to see a producer who had read a script I wrote. I got there, and she kept me waiting for an hour. When I was finally ready to leave, she called me in and said, "Bob, sit down. I loved your script. I heard it's terrific."

Barry: Yeah, it's tough. But when I started to work with Mel Brooks . . . well, that was great. He's really generous and secure enough to take ideas. You don't have to worry that he'll cut things because you thought of them. And with Brooks you get to see the stuff being shot the same day you thought of it, and you're there with him talking about another beat for the laugh, or camera angles. Doing *Silent Movie* and *High Anxiety* with Mel was worth about three years of school.

Bob: Yeah, I like his movies, because they're really vulgar one second and poetic the next. So when did you make the move to . . .*And Justice for All*? That was a strong black comedy.

Barry: When I was working on *High Anxiety*, my wife, Valerie Curtin, and I decided to do a script on the judicial system. We were working on it for eight months with no support. I mean, nobody would even take a meeting with us for it. You know Hollywood. "You want to do a movie about French toast? Good, let's take a meeting." But for a black comedy about the judicial system, forget it. Not one meeting. It was terribly frustrating. Finally, Joe Wizan, the producer, got involved, but he couldn't get a meeting with anybody until Danny Melnick stepped in. Melnick read the script and suggested a few changes. Valerie and I made them, and the next thing we knew they wanted to do it.

Bob: That's what is so loony about the movie business. Something looks dead, totally finished, and the next thing you know it's on. How did Pacino get involved?

Barry: We always had him in mind. My agent, Mike Ovitz, sent it to him and he said he'd have a reading. Now, when Al reads, he has all his friends come over and they read the script out loud. But slowly, I mean very slowly. So slowly that I got panicky. You couldn't tell if there were laughs there or not, at that speed. So I went back to the hotel, and I said to my wife, "Well, that's it, it's all over. It's no go." I was sitting in the bathtub without water, you know? Down the drain. Two hours later, Mike calls and says, "Al loves it. We have a deal." It was great.

Bob: That's terrific. You said you'd written an entire script. Now, *Cattle Annie* was the first script I ever wrote, and I did it without help from any producers, until Rupert Hitzig bought it. I know that if I had taken meetings on it, everybody would have said, "Are you kidding? A comedy Western with two little girls as the stars? Forget it." So my ignorance of the meeting-taking syndrome allowed me to finish and sell the script. Do you generally complete a script first?

Barry: If I can. I think if a writer has the money and can take the time to do a whole script, that's the way to go. You can waste a ton of time in meetings and having a lot of people tell you, "This needs changing." "That element has to be added." And then when you make the changes, they don't want it. So it's best to do a whole script.

Bob: What are you doing now?

Barry: Well, I've got a movie called *Best Friends* with Burt Reynolds and Goldie Hawn. [It's scheduled for Christmas release.] About two writers who live together and drive each other a little crazy.

Bob: More autobiography. Another thing you hear not to do. Everybody now is screaming, "Give us *Blue Lagoon II*!" "Give us *Brooke Gives Up Youth*!"

Barry: Yeah, that's what they're saying this week. But the truth is if you write what you really care about with style and passion, then you'll be all right. Somebody will come along who can tell the difference. For sure.