BAD BOYS—WILD ON THE SCREEN

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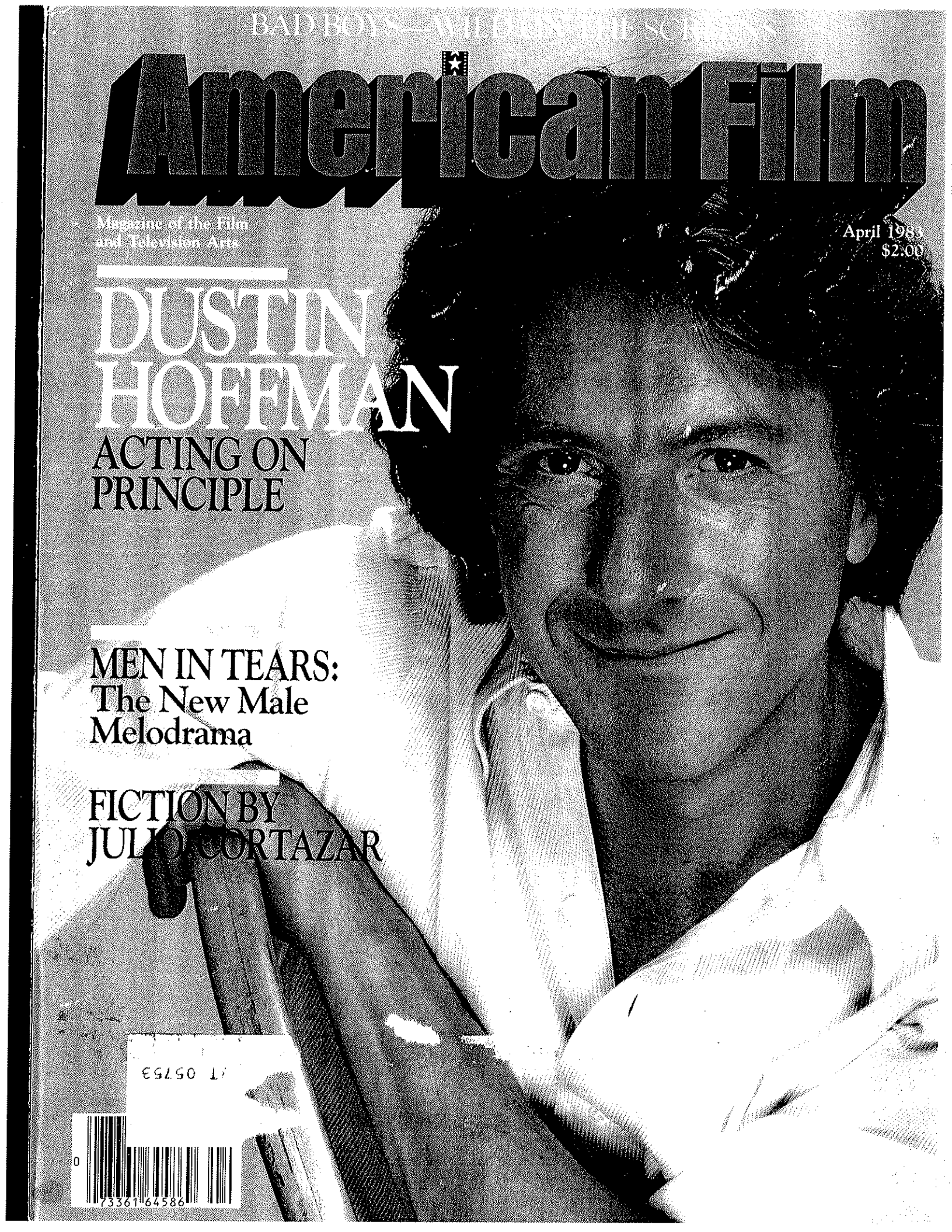
DUSTIN HOFFMAN
ACTING ON PRINCIPLE

MEN IN TEARS: The New Male Melodrama

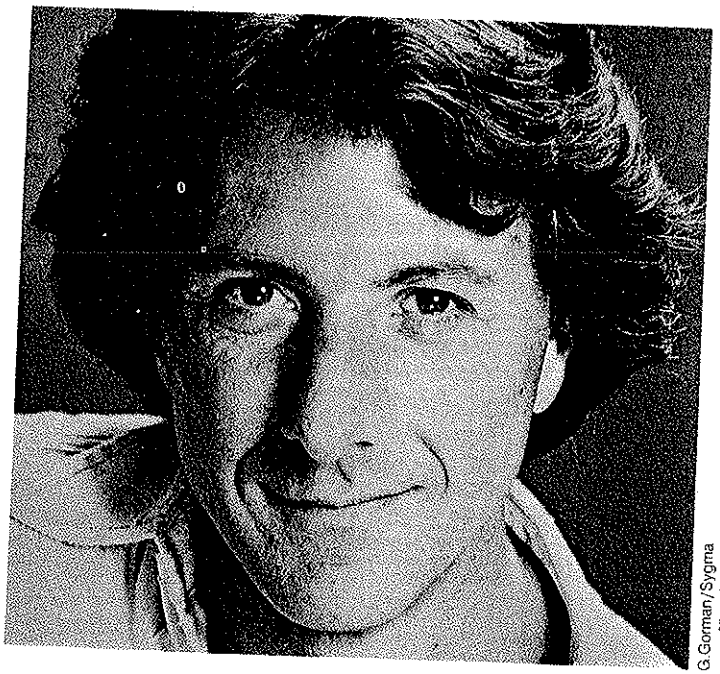
FICTION BY JULIO CORTAZAR



Dustin Hoffman

The star of *Tootsie* explains his passion for perfection, how he develops his roles, and why movies are never as good as they could be.

The Graduate, Ratso Rizzo, Little Big Man, Tootsie—for more than fifteen years Dustin Hoffman has been creating movie characters that define issues and capture attitudes of our time, that move out of the movies and become part of our cultural baggage. Hoffman has also had an unusual amount of influence—especially for a performer in this "industry"—in shaping the vehicles he appears in. This is not only unusual, but controversial, and Hoffman's career is marked by flare-ups over his demands and his vision of movies. In the Dialogue, Hoffman discusses the work of the actor in movies, his own relationships with directors and producers, his film projects, and his objections to the common perception of himself as a man who loves a fight for its own sake. As he says, "You can't not fight. . . . That's how you get the best out of each other."



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This interview was conducted by Mitch Tuchman, the coauthor (with Emile de Antonio) of the forthcoming *Painters Painting: American Modernism in the Words of Those Who Created It.*

Mitch Tuchman: You've said that your role in *Tootsie* took longer to put behind you than other roles.

Dustin Hoffman: I don't know why it was harder to drop emotionally. Some of it may have had to do with my mother, who I had spent a great deal of time with since she had a stroke in the last year and a half of her life, which was at the same time that I was working on the script with Murray Schisgal and then Larry Gelbart. My brother Ron felt that Dorothy Michaels is, in fact, at least in spirit, our mother. (She, as a matter of fact, is the reason that the movie is called *Tootsie*, because when I was a kid, she called me Tootsie.)

Tuchman: Any other reason?

Hoffman: Anytime you feel that a portion of your life is wasted because of a way of thinking that you have had, and you think that now you understand something, there's a sadness in having wasted so many years. Growing up in Los Angeles in the forties and the fifties and then moving to New York City in the late fifties, I was a product of the time when I was raised. It was the *Playboy* center fold mentality, which still possesses me, and still works. I'm still taken by that fantasy girl. When I tried to become this character, Dorothy Michaels, I couldn't become as pretty as I wanted to become, and we tested for over a year, because I felt that I should try to look as attractive as I could, just as I want to be as a man.

It suddenly occurred to me after doing Dorothy for a while that if I'd met her at a party, I'd never so much as condescend to talk to her, because physically she was a write-off. It's a shallow attitude, certainly, to judge people by the way they look, and I think that is what started to make me sad.

Tuchman: For all the opportunities that had been missed?

Hoffman: For all the interesting women that I didn't spend time with because of the way they looked. Also, I think I realized that if I wasn't going up to these women, in a sense I was rejecting myself. I was a male Dorothy. In high school, girls passed me over for the same reasons.

Dorothy was able to accept the way she looked; I couldn't. She was able to have a tremendous amount of self-respect, and I guess, for that reason, it was hard to lose her.

Tuchman: How did you get the idea for the role?

Hoffman: It started with *Kramer vs. Kramer*. At the end of the movie, I wanted to feminize that character more. We improvised a lot in that movie—we improvised a courtroom scene, and at one point I had a good emotional thing going. The judge said, "Why should you have the child?" I said, "Because I'm his mother." And I didn't know I said it and I couldn't get Bob Benton and Stanley Jaffe to use it in the cut—they thought it was gilding the lily.

So when the film was over, I was very excited about a new feeling—what makes a man, what makes a woman, what is gender? I had a lot of conversations with Murray Schisgal, over what masculinity is, what femininity is, the difference between homosexuality and femininity in men. Sud-

denly he asked me this question: "What kind of woman would you be if you were a woman?" And I said, "What a great question."

So we started to experiment. I was so concerned with looking like a woman and not like a man in drag, and sounding like a woman and not a falsettoed camp thing, that I couldn't concentrate on the character. After a year, when the day came when I looked and sounded like a woman, then I made a crucial decision: I'm not going to try to do a character; I'm just going to be myself behind this and see what happens. And that's all I did. I had to assume a southern voice because it held my voice up.

Tuchman: You developed this character before you created a story?

Hoffman: No, at the same time. While Murray was writing drafts—and after that with Larry Gelbart and Elaine May.

Tuchman: Why did Sydney Pollack take the agent role?

Hoffman: Whenever we worked on the scenes between Michael and the agent, he would read the agent, and I just thought he was wonderful. He didn't want to do it. I just said, "Sydney, there's so much between us that seems to be part of this relationship." Sydney had said on more than one occasion that an actor's an actor and should just be an actor. The actor is usually a hired hand. Regardless of whether you're a star or not, you're still a hired hand, because when you're a star you're then working with star directors, so it evens out—you get treated the same as when you were off-Broadway.

Yet this was *my* project—I was the producer. Pollack's refusal to see me in any role but that of an actor was somewhat paternalistic, just the way the agent sees Michael. I think that some directors are closed minded about what an actor can contribute. You'll hear directors say sometimes, "Yes, I got a performance out of that actor; I had to push him. I had to push him further than he thought he could go." Well, there are probably a lot of uncredited occasions where actors have pushed directors into areas that they haven't gone into before, and I think there have been more than a few occasions where a picture is better because of the actor who is in it. They will say, "The actor is subjective—only cares about his own part." Not so. An actor is as capable of considering "the whole" as the director, and often does. Sure we care about our own parts, but we have a responsibility to the entire film also, and I don't think many of us ignore that responsibility. And, believe me, I know some very subjective directors, who focus mostly on covering their ass. Yet actors generally are thought of as somehow less intelligent or responsible or aware of what filmmaking is about than the director or the producer.

I think Brando once said it—we're housewives, we're these emotional creatures. They say, "We're going to make you look good, just don't argue. Don't try to make the big decisions. Leave that to us. Leave that to the daddies, the husbands." It doesn't have to be that way. I think there should be a real partnership, not the classically imagined situation where a supposedly "solid, objective" director simply "handles" a "neurotic, subjective" actor.

Tuchman: This business of you and Pollack having to agree on everything—was that a stipulation he made?

Hoffman: No. It's one *I* made. He said, "If I'm going to direct this, I'm going to produce it." I said, "But you're taking away all the controls I've earned over the years I worked on the project." He said, "Well, I won't do it otherwise." So we bargained, and I had to give him final cut. But even that was with an agreement that I would get script and cast approval and that I would go into the cutting room, see it as it was being cut, and be able to disagree and even show alternatives.

What's on the screen is the result of our discussions, our arguments, our fights. If I had not argued, I think the film would be fifty percent different. I'm not saying it would be worse or better, but it certainly would be much different.

Tuchman: I've heard that Shelley Winters sometimes builds up a maelstrom of tension on the set and then works out of that somehow. Is fighting really necessary for your performance?

Hoffman: No. I heard Sydney say on television that he thought I was neurotic, that he thought I needed to work out of that kind of thing, and it's not true. I didn't work that way with Bob Benton in *Kramer*, and I haven't worked that way in most of the films I've done. I've done about fifteen films, and I think I've had a rough time with about three or four directors; Sydney is one of them. Sydney and I had a rough time together, and I wish that he could find it in his mind to see it as it really was, and not the picture he has painted for himself, which is, "I'm the normal, healthy, rational director, and he's the neurotic actor, and I had to sit on him."

I like to be very prepared, and I feel that the success or failure of a film is many times determined before you start principal photography. I wanted rehearsal very much. I was promised two weeks and was grieved that I didn't get it, and that we followed the risky course of starting to shoot with a screenplay that wasn't completed, because Sydney had decided to rewrite the script I had approved. And I think that created a tension that never eased. Never dissipated. We should have had all those disagreements out in a rehearsal room someplace, before we started to shoot, like I did with Benton, and we should have locked in the script before we started. That way we could have avoided most of the delays and arguments during shooting.

The trouble with movies is that it's such

The character of Dorothy Michaels was inspired in part by Hoffman's mother.

I like collaboration—some of the best ideas I've ever seen in films have come from somebody on the crew.

an intimate experience, especially for the principals. You get married when you start working together, before you become friends. I don't think Sydney and I ever had a chance to become friends. I don't even know if we would have; I don't know if we're the type of personalities that blend together well.

If you want to get down to the facts of the accusation that I'm "difficult," simply talk to the many directors that I've worked with, and I don't think you'll find more than three or four who would say I gave them a rough time. That doesn't mean I don't "fight" in the sense of questioning decisions—battling if I think they're wrong—but it's not that I "love" fighting or get off on it.

Tuchman: Which directors would at this point be your greatest fans? Which would say, "He's terrific," and which would say, "Don't mention his name in my office"?

Hoffman: I think Benton and I worked well together on *Kramer*. Mike Nichols and I worked well together on *The Graduate*. John Schlesinger and I had a great time together on *Midnight Cowboy*; we had a tougher time on *Marathon Man*, because I think the genre was more difficult for us. Franklin Schaffner and I had a good time together on *Papillon*. I think Bob Fosse and I had a tough time on *Lenny*, although Peter Yates and I got along very well on *John and Mary*. Sam Peckinpah and I got along fine on *Straw Dogs*, and the same was true of Alan Pakula on *All the President's Men*. Despite the problems on *Agatha*, Michael Apted and I got along well, and I had no problem with Arthur Penn on *Little Big Man*. On the other hand, Ulu Grosbard would certainly not want my name mentioned in his office. We were best friends, and wound up working two times together, but the second film, *Straight Time*, breached the friendship.

Tuchman: What are the specific reasons you fight with directors when you do?

Hoffman: I've done fifteen films now in fifteen years, and I'm learning what does work, what doesn't work. I'm learning about how much self-deception goes on amongst the creators themselves and how many critical errors are casually made—the lack of thought glossed over with glib, pat phrases—"Don't worry about that, it's not important, we don't need that shot." Those "little" mistakes cost the movie, collapse the movie. That's why I fight. I want to know *why* we don't need that shot. If you can convince me, OK, but don't give me unreasoned platitudes.

Somebody told me Picasso said a painter walks around for months with a movie of images in his mind and he winds up with *one* image on canvas—imagine the tension, because he's got fifty million images he's rejecting. Every new stroke destroys the painting before. That's exactly the way a movie is, because we can work on a screenplay, we can work on a structure, we can work until we're blue in the face, then look at the first day of rushes and it's different. It's either worse or it's better, but it's not what it was on the page. You've got to be led by what's on the screen, and yet you work with people sometimes who are not led by that—it's like they're blind. It's not translating from the page, yet they want to stick with it anyway, and you go crazy because you see how little it takes to hurt a film. Another painter once said, "I'm so afraid when I'm painting, because the slightest little thing, the slightest little move, one stroke, collapses the tension of the canvas."

Tuchman: What is the appropriate division of labor between the actor, the director, and the producer?

Hoffman: I think that the best working relationship I've ever had on any film was *Kramer*. The producer was Stanley Jaffe, the director-writer was Bob Benton. I had this part that was central to the story, and the three of us worked on the script for months and we brought forth our own experiences. We argued, we talked, we fought—and out of it, I think, came a somewhat personal film, by the three of us. I thought it was ideal. We even fought during the filming of it. You can't not fight. I'm not saying what Pollack says—that I live to fight or need it emotionally. I don't. But when you think the film may succeed or fail depending on the decision you're fighting about, it's essential to fight, to question. That's how you get the best out of each other.

Sometimes, I don't think film is set up to get the best work out of anybody. In a sense, it's set up for you to fail, by virtue of the fact that you're told what amount to create every day. And implicitly it's stated that you can't go home again—you're usually not going to get another chance to do retakes, which are very expensive.

Woody Allen told me that he has written in his contract that he can come back during postproduction to shoot maybe twenty, thirty percent of the film, and in that way do what a writer or a sculptor does—you go back and you keep working on it till it's right. Most movies aren't that way. They always say, "Don't worry about the sets; they'll be there." And then they're not there. Studios are funny that way. They don't want you to go back again. Woody Allen told me, "I never shoot sets. That's why I shoot Rockefeller Center, because I know it's going to be there."

That's why I think preparation plays such a major part. But you live in a kind of Looney Tunes atmosphere sometimes in this business. If you say that you spent two or three years on a screenplay, they think you're crazy; why, I don't know. A book can take ten years. But with a screenplay, there's something wrong if you're working on it more than a few months. Yet if you take your time and get it right before you start shooting, you'll save time and money and have a far better film.

Tuchman: We hear a lot about "collaborative filmmaking" these days. Is that a concept you approve of?

Hoffman: Yes, I like collaborative filmmaking. I like to go on a set and have everyone feel that they can be a part of that film. There is a caste system that exists in

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Hoffman's friends feared that the role of Ratso would kill his career.

Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills

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filmmaking that I think a few people are trying to break down. No one should just have a job. No one should be told that they're "just" the costumer, just do the costumes, or they're "just" the makeup man, just do the makeup.

You're working with people who are really first-rate in their work, and who do many more films than the directors, the producers, or the stars. The crew members go from one film to another—their credits are triple or quadruple what ours are, and they get a smell of whether the work is fraudulent or real. Some of the best ideas I've ever seen that result in the finished film have come, when allowed, from somebody on the crew. Tommy Priestley, the camera operator on *Kramer*—he was going through the same thing the character in the film was, and he would say, "Jesus, this is right out of my life." And I'd go up to him and I'd talk to him and I'd say, "Tell me. Tell me." And he did. And it's on the screen.

I think it's a family, and I think it can be an emotional, spiritual experience. It still means you have a director—you have someone who has final say—but it doesn't mean that you have an atmosphere where people are afraid to open their mouths. There's no better feeling in the world than to hear a crew laugh at something on the set or to have them applaud or to have them come up and say, "Good take" or to have them *involved* in it. I don't think Dorothy Michaels would be on the screen as she is now without the crew's love for that character. They pulled for her. They wanted her to work. And a great deal of the credit for how well she works is theirs.

Tuchman: Given that this sort of familylike situation or noncaste situation is beneficial for filmmaking, you still have talked quite a bit about wanting control.

Hoffman: When you see the same mistakes being made year after year, you have to be an idiot not to speak up. Suddenly you're no longer a virgin; you know a couple of things.

To have control means that you can set up an atmosphere. If I initiate a project, I would certainly want to control its destiny. But if a director comes to me with his baby, no, I don't expect to have control of it. At the same time, I've found that I work best when I work in a collaborative way.

I'm not saying that you give a script out to everybody and say, "Tell me what you think." A few key people work on it, and *then* it begins to open up. The art director

comes into it, the cinematographer comes into it, the costume-wardrobe people, the editor, etc.—those key people expand it, and all start to add input. You don't want to stifle that. I once read that Ingmar Bergman wrote a letter to his entire crew and cast before he started, saying, "Now that we're starting production, now that we have the script, please feel that this is a family—it is *our* film."

Interestingly enough, what doesn't get any press is that *Tootsie* had a terrific crew and cast. Very close and very warm, and there was a lot of hard, first-rate work on the set every day, and a great spirit.

Tuchman: If I were to make an analogy between what you do and something else, it would be Paul Muni. Even when he played a role that was a contemporary person, he seemed to play it as a character actor.

Hoffman: After *The Graduate*, everyone said, "Well, Mike Nichols has got this guy who's just playing himself." I got so upset when I read that, I couldn't wait to prove it wrong, and when I chose to do *Midnight Cowboy*, Nichols called up at one point and said, "Are you sure you want to play Ratso Rizzo? It's not even the star role. You're secondary and it's such an unattractive role and you could kill the career that you established with *The Graduate*—you should play Joe Buck." But I was out to show that I was a character actor—and, in fact, Benjamin was as much a character as any part that I had done—and that I was not just this nebbish kid that Nichols found.

I was very affected by Lee Strasberg when I studied with him; he would say over and over again, "There is no such thing as a juvenile or an ingenue or a villain or a hero or a leading man. We're all characters." I was maybe twenty-one years old, I'd just come to New York to study, and it hit me very strong, because I was a victim of casting. Even today, casting people can kill you. Because you sit down, and before you say a word they're going to look at you and without knowing anything about you tell you, "Well, you're not a leading man. You're not a juvenile. We'll cast you as a doctor, or a scientist, maybe." What's much more fun is to get to know someone, and then to see a way of casting that most people wouldn't cast them as. You start to see something coming out that is what they are underneath.

When I was a younger actor, I kept being told I was a "character juvenile"—they meant juvenile delinquent. I was always told by people, "Once you mature, once you get into your forties, you'll start to get character roles." Now, I think that, like everybody else, I want to stay young-looking as long as I can. Aside from my own narcissism, I want to keep the range open. I want to keep that range as wide as I can. One of the reasons I did *Marathon Man* is because I said to myself, This is my last chance to be in college. I just could feel it. I was closing in on forty at that time.

Tuchman: How do you prepare?

Hoffman: I have a disagreement with some directors—I say actors shouldn't have to "act"; the scene should be constructed in such a way that you don't have to. When I did Ratso Rizzo, an actor told me, "Once you get the limp right, why don't you put rocks in your shoe? You'll never have to think about limping. It will be there; you won't have to worry about it." And I think that's one of the greatest things that anybody ever said, 'cause you shouldn't have to "act." It should be there, like butter—all the work should have been done beforehand—so you don't have to sit there and start jerking up emotion. It should flow.

Brando went out and did research in *Mutiny on the Bounty* and found out that when you die from burns you die from shock, and he found out what shock was like. It was like being encased in water. So when he came to do the shot, he put himself in a bathtub on the ship. When it got time for the close-up, he was in the bathtub filled with ice. So he didn't have to "act" it. That's an extreme example. But I admire his imagination.

God knows I've done enough crap in my life to grow a few flowers, but one of the things that constantly hits me is that when I go outside on the street, what I see is not what I see on the screen, and I never stop thinking about that. I turn on the television, and what I see on the screen is not what I see in real life. It bothers me. I want to get closer to what I see in life. I love to see hair out of place. I love to see people without makeup, or at least with their own blush showing, their own pimples, and their own specific behavior. It's like when you go to New York to shoot, everyone says, "We've got to get the real life of New York City." Well, the minute you rope off a street, you alter it. Movies tend to take out life, and then put back a substitute for it. I think television news has had an incredible impact on film. You see every human emotion in any twenty-four-hour period.

When you turn on the television sometimes, you say, "Is this a documentary?" That's the way you want it to be on film. But, at the same time, you don't want it to be pure documentary, because it's art; you want it to be condensed, subtly heightened. Fellini took background and made it fore-

ground, and once he did that, I was in love with him. He does two things, in other words, at his best: He shows you life the way it really is, and yet as we don't always see it.

Movies are not plays. With plays, you sit in the audience, and the first five rows of the orchestra really get to see the actors, like in a movie. Outside of that, no one gets to see anything. The words are carrying you. In a movie, everyone has a front-row seat, so the words, in a sense, become secondary. Generally speaking, this is a very young art form. We're constantly playing with it. In *The Graduate*, some of the most wonderful moments were accidents. The same is true in *Midnight Cowboy*, *Tootsie*, *Kramer*—they're accidents. It's interesting to me what an audience remembers. They don't remember anything differently than they remember from their own lives. What do you remember of your life? This incident, that one, boom, boom—these vivid colors—the rest is like a blur. Of the films that I've done, by and large, people point to the same moments all the time, and they don't remember the rest of the film. They just remember these moments. And a lot of them were improvised, a lot of them were accidents. Banging on the taxi in *Midnight Cowboy*, "I'm walking here," that was an accident. That was a hidden camera, and it was a cab that almost ran us over. Schlesinger left it in, but many directors wouldn't have.

Tuchman: Are you hopeful for better-made movies out of this system?

Hoffman: If you have truth, if you have honesty, if you do your work beforehand, if they give you the money—and if you get very lucky—how are you ever going to miss making a good film?

You study acting until you're blue in the face and you go out there and it's got nothing to do with what you studied: "Here's your script, here are your lines, here's your mark, hit that, hit that, do this—and that's it. Good-bye and good luck." And you say, "What did I learn? What was I spending ten years learning for?" But, you know, it's not our money; it's their money. If only they would give you the time—but they don't. It seems too expensive. I understand; but I wish it were different. I wish I could convince them that it doesn't have to be more expensive; that rehearsal isn't a dirty word, but a concept that can save money; that rewriting doesn't mean the picture will never be made, just that it will be built on a solid structure; that doing your work *in advance*—even if that preparation takes longer—will save time and money in the end and, more important,

will give you far better odds of success. Well, who knows, maybe someday we'll convince them—whoever "they" are.

Tuchman: If making movies is frequently a frustrating process that ends up with a disappointing result, where is the gratification?

Hoffman: I have great gratification and satisfaction on the finished product of *Tootsie*. I also do with *Kramer*. I do with a lot of films that I've done.

But you always want to go back and change certain things. It's like taking an easel out—you've been looking at this countryside, and one day you take your easel out, and you find a spot, and you put it out there, and you've got your canvas up, and you've got your palette, and you start painting. You're now three hours into it, and suddenly you happen to look down and you hear a noise far off, a train—you look down, and you've put your easel on a railroad track, and you start painting it just a teeny bit faster, and the train now is coming a little bit faster, and you don't want to paint faster, but you have to. And suddenly the train's getting faster and you're painting faster and faster so that just before the train hits, you jump off with the easel, and the canvas and the palette knife go flying all over, and you're just holding on to that canvas as the train rushes past you, and that's the movie.

The Films of Dustin Hoffman

The Tiger Makes Out—Columbia—1967.
The Graduate—Embassy Pictures—1967.
Midnight Cowboy—United Artists—1969.
John and Mary—Twentieth Century-Fox—1969.
Madigan's Millions—American International Pictures—1969.
Little Big Man—National General Pictures—1970.
Who Is Harry Kellerman and Why Is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Me?—National General Pictures—1971.
Straw Dogs—Cinerama—1971.
Alfredo Alfredo—Paramount—1973.
Papillon—Allied Artists—1973.
Lenny—United Artists—1974.
All the President's Men—Warner Bros.—1976.
Marathon Man—Paramount—1976.
Straight Time—Warner Bros.—1978.
Agatha—Warner Bros.—1979.
Kramer vs. Kramer—Columbia—1979.
Tootsie—Columbia—1982.