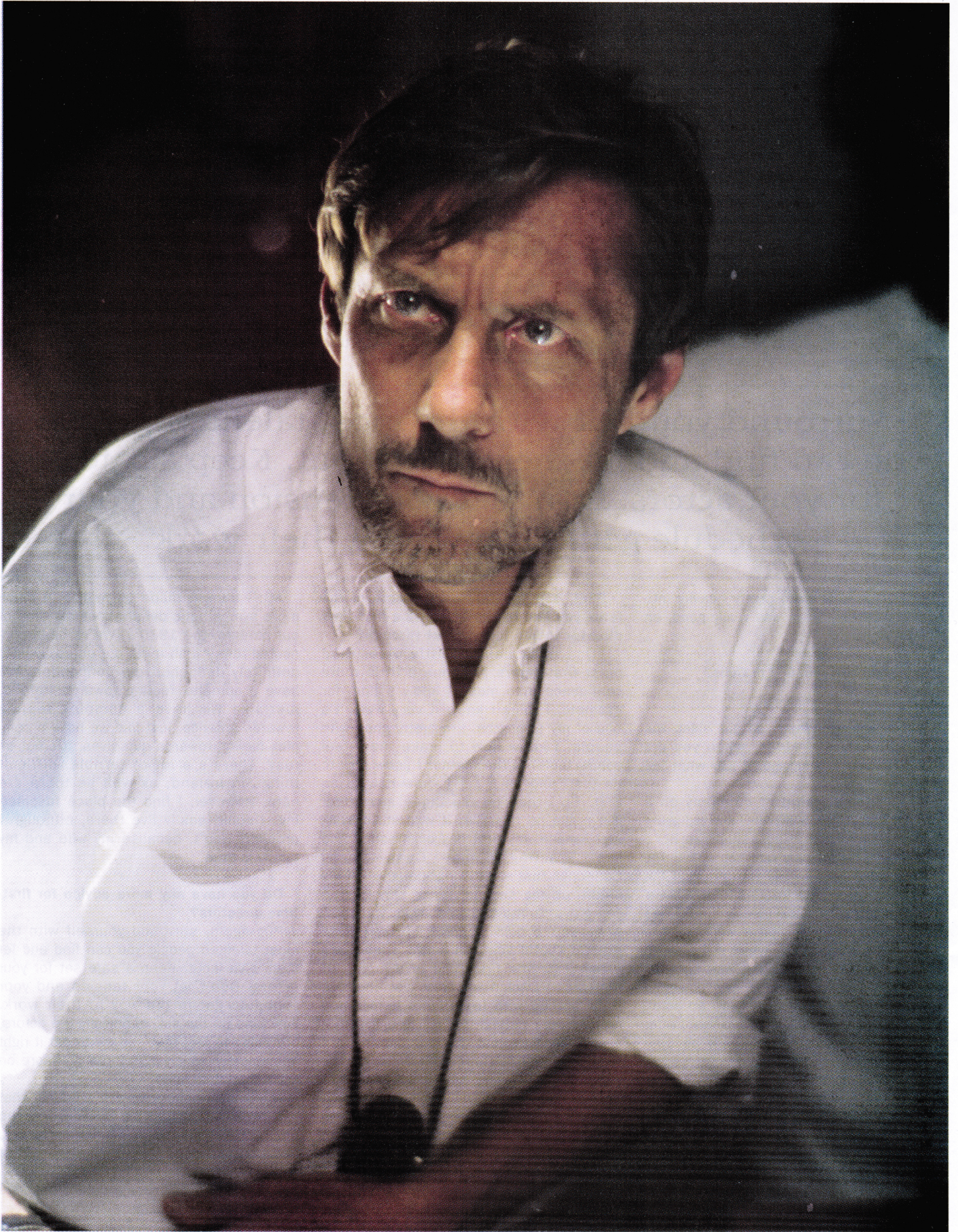


THE VISION OF ROLAND JOFFÉ

by **elaine ash**

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Conducting an interview with director Roland Joffé is a bit like taking the pilotseat of a spacecraft. You know that, conversationally, he can pretty much take you anywhere on the planet or beyond. The challenge for the interviewer is touring Joffé's personal solar system of film philosophy, social commentary, and metaphysics without getting left behind somewhere over, say, Saturn. But unlike many elevated thinkers (who can be found in any grad school cafe), Joffé actually has the vitality to imprint his ideas through film on our culture.

At press time, Joffé was in the final days of shooting *Vatel*, starring Uma Thurman and Gerard Depardieu for Gaumont, a large French production company. Warner Bros. and New Regency have just released Joffé's *Goodbye Lover*, starring Patricia Arquette, Dermot Mulroney, and Don Johnson. It's a satiric *noir* thriller he calls film *gris*, "just off-center enough to make sense."

Joffé's pictures have been nominated for a total of nine Academy Awards, nine British Academy Awards, and prizes from Italy, France, and Poland; none of which he would have thought possible as a child (brought up by grandparents) who saw his first play on holiday in Scotland, and developed an instant crush on the lead actress. Backstage, he remembers, "I was entranced by the gypsy quality...and fascinated with how they did it all." The acting flame burned right up to the time he entered Manchester University as an English and drama student, where, after seven weeks of play rehearsals and two weeks of performances, the professor went down the line of students and stopped at Joffé to sigh, "Ah, Roland. Well, I suppose you *don't* want to act."

After graduating in 1968, he started with a little theater company in Leicester, touring schools and working with disabled children. After a year, a position came open with the Young Vic, and a few years later, he became the youngest director at the National Theatre Company under Laurence Olivier. Five years later, he graduated to television as a trainee at Granada, pulling cables. Soon, opportunities arose—directing a local news show, episodes of "Coronation Street," documentaries, and two series: "The Stars Look Down" and "Bill Brand." In 1982, Joffé co-wrote and directed "United Kingdom" which won the British Press Guild Award and was nominated for a British Academy Award. It caught the attention of producer David Puttnam, who sent him the *The Killing Fields* script.

Written by Bruce Robinson, from a New York Times article, *The Killing Fields* had an ambiguous and controversial hero: Sydney Schanberg (played by Sam Waterston), a New York Times war-correspondent, who partly caused his interpreter-friend's disappearance into the Khmer Rouge death

camps (although Schanberg never gave up trying to rescue him). The film title came from the lush, Cambodian grasslands where millions were slain and left to decompose. In 1985, the film won three out of the seven Academy Award nominations, along with seven British awards.

Joffé's grand-epic follow-up, *The Mission*, starring Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons, gained two Academy Awards, and the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes. De Niro played a slave trader/mercenary converted to Jesuit priest under the guidance of Father Gabriel (Irons.) The film firmly established Joffé as a director with an "internationally golden" camera, who saw both sides of moral predicaments and avoided black and white conclusions.

For all intents and purposes, *Fat Man and Little Boy* (1989) should have been a hit. Robinson returned to write the script and Paul Newman starred, with a supporting cast of Bonnie Bedelia, John Cusack, Laura Dern, and Natasha Richardson. The story traced the development of the first atomic bomb, and the complicated relationship of General Leslie R. Groves (played by Paul Newman) and brilliant physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer (Dwight Shultz). Although the film did well, it didn't match the success of Joffé's previous films. Joffé moved on to make *City of Joy* with Patrick Swayze and *The Scarlet Letter* starring Demi Moore, Gary Oldman, and Robert Duvall.

Goodbye Lover, written by Ron Peer, Joel Cohen and Alec Sokolow, is the story of Sandra (Patricia Arquette), who instigates an affair with the brother (Don Johnson) of her husband (Dermot Mulroney), in order to set the brother up for a murder (by the husband!), to make it look like an accident. They're all set to collect the insurance money when they find out that just previous to the murder, bro' was secretly married to Peggy (Mary-Louise Parker), who will now collect the cash. Double-crosses zigzag the plot when Ellen DeGeneres arrives as the cynical, badly dressed, corndog-chomping, teeth-picking Detective Pompano. Ray McKinnon plays her hapless, bible-quoting sidekick. Things are never what they seem, right up to the climax, when the two biggest snakes end up with only each other.

With *Goodbye Lover* already in theaters, and the final days of *Vatel* wrapping in France, Joffé took precious time to talk with Venice about film eroticism, Laurence Olivier, Nietzsche, why women are more clear-sighted than men, Francis Ford Coppola, bad press, Academy Awards, our self-interested human condition, and the current state of anarchy in the movie business.

Venice: You're very busy there in Paris.

Roland Joffé: We're just beginning our final week of shooting *Vatel*, which is a script by Tom Stoppard [*Shakespeare In Love*] and Jeanne Labrune. It's the story of a banquet that's thrown for three days for

the King of France, Louis the 14th.

What drew you to *Goodbye Lover*, when sister-producers Alexandra and Elinor Milchan first sent you the script?

I fell in love with the wryness of the story because it's a hymn to narcissism. I loved the way this message was delivered with a tremendously light touch, and all the hidden metaphors in the story.

***Goodbye Lover* has the highest erotic quotient with the least amount of graphic detail I've ever seen. Was this intentional?**

Yes. In a strange way, we imbue everything with sexuality, but the sex comes from what feelings inside us can be triggered by an image. You can look at a totally naked body and it won't trigger any erotic images whatsoever. But look at a body that suggests if you just remove one piece of clothing you would have the chance to see something sexual—you become a participant without even knowing it. Fetishism will take a foot and compress all the eroticism, a complete sexual experience into [it]. And the reason it's so powerful is its suggestiveness. I love eroticism in movies but love scenes have been made so often and shot so often, I don't think anyone is particularly interested anymore. Anybody who wants that will just head straight for real pornography and have all the fun they need that way.

Don and Patricia's characters have an illicit moment under a table, in a client's home, and the camera pans across the table, everything's rocking, and you just see Sandra's dominatrix shoe sticking up. Our imaginations go far wilder than your camera ever could.

There's an interesting little detail there where her hand comes up and she grabs an olive and then gives it to Don.

And then she shrieks!

And the question on everybody's mind is, what is he doing with that olive? It allows everyone to be private and free in their imaginations without me telling everyone how to do everything.

Do you still storyboard everything?

Yes. I'd always been around painting and drawing and art, and as a child [I] used to draw a lot and do my own comic books. I think the camera should be like a child's eyes. You know how a child's eyes wander over everything? That's what a camera should be doing, because a child is actually playing with perspective and shape and form by lying on its back and looking at the ceiling or crawling under the table. Children will often, while eating, duck down and stare along bottles. They like the perspective of the bottles, and that's one of the funs [sic] of cinema—you allow people to use their eyes rather like children do.



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always had bad press from the critics, Mr. Spencer. How have you dealt with that?" And Spencer peered at him over his little circular, pebbled glasses, and said, "Ah, critics. It's so strange. They seem to think that they've seen my paintings, and, of course, it's the other way round." I wrote that [quote] out because I loved it so much and kept it in my pocket ever since.

If you could go back to the night *The Killing Fields* won its Oscars, would you have made career decisions differently?

I suppose if I had been interested in my career as an object, separate from my own growth, and thought of it as a stairway to the stars, I probably would have looked at capitalizing on making commercial movies. I didn't want to lose touch with the person I was before I got into that situation. I remember one journalist saying to me it must have been wonderful coming to Hollywood because isn't it wonderful to watch the red carpet being rolled out in front of you. And I said it was, but I couldn't avoid hearing, as I walked down it, the deafening sound of its being rolled up after me.

You have been quoted as saying, "You can tell most about a man by knowing what worries him." What worries you these days?

That I'm not worried by very much. I really love life. It puzzles me enormously and I find it contradictory, but fun. Mind you I'm saying that with the television playing away and everybody being cleansed ethnically out of Kosovo. That's pretty strange. When I was doing *The Mission*, we used a tribe of Indians who had not seen any white people before. And they were in a bad political situation, weren't being very well looked after in the state of Colombia where they lived, and they asked if we might help them form a political group. [At first I told them no], that [the last thing they] probably needed was the help of do-gooding whites. [But I did] approach a man who was the leader of a mini-United Nations of South America and offered him the role of the chief in the movie if he would meet with them. He came, played the role, and set up a federation. So that's how I see artists should involve themselves politically. We have to think really carefully before we pretend to be politicians or tell people how to order their lives. In all the films I've made, I never tried to say, "Aren't we terrible." I tried to show everybody struggling with their ambiguities and that everybody in the main thought they were doing something that would have a good result.

Even in *The Killing Fields*?

Even Sydney Schanberg as a journalist could only see half the situation, because he felt he was on the moral high ground working for the New York Times. And so

what I was trying to say was even for the best of us there's that horrible moment when the bottom falls out of our universe and we find out we're doing what we criticized. I think that's why the New York Times didn't like the movie, because they didn't come out as morally impeccable as they liked. And I think they've held a grudge ever since. But that's my own opinion.

Have you secured your next project?

I try not to do that because at the end of every movie you become a different person. I'm actually writing a novel at the moment; it's called *The Importance of Kissing*. It's a comic novel, rather sexy, and about how weird we all are.

Is there another genre you'd like to explore?

I'm happy to explore any genre. I do have a very odd story in mind. I don't want to tell you what it is because good stories are rare. It's a film *noir* set 2000 years ago.

Any new directors caught your eye?

Zoe Clarke Williams made a film called *Men* on a very low budget. I liked her work so much I was doing some pilots for MTV as a producer and asked Zoe to shoot them as a mark of my respect. It was the best way I could say how much I liked her work. She's American, living in Los Angeles. And I've got great respect for her and think she has a very fresh perspective.

What about Hollywood's latest output?

I'm a little bemused at what's coming out of Hollywood these days. I'm not a critic; it's not my skill. I make movies in my own way. And I don't want to be a crotchety old thing who thinks I'm the only one who knows how to make movies. I think the whole industry's changed and become so "brand dependent" that I think young directors have a terrible time to fight their way through. We're less free than we were fifty years ago to be inventive with form, and that's also because cinema has to fight so hard in the marketplace. I don't think anybody's winning the battle. I don't even think studios are winning it. Studios are in a huge state of confusion about how to market their movies and which movies are going to do what. What it costs to market a film is as much as it costs to make it. It's magnificently anarchic in a way.

Any advice in how to counter this as a struggling director?

Be as childlike as you can, playing with your toys as purely and as simply as you can. There is no way to guarantee the success of your movie these days. You have to say, "The movie is strong enough by itself to stand, and nobody can take that away." In the end, faith in individual vision is all you've got to believe in. ▼