

THE RUNAWAY GENIUS

The herculean struggle to get Terrence Malick's first movie in two decades—a film version of James Jones's war epic *The Thin Red Line*—to the screen was complicated not only by its elusive director's reticence but also by the two producers who believe they made it all happen

BY PETER BISKIND

SAVING PRIVATE MALICK
The Allies hit Guadalcanal in Malick's *The Thin Red Line*. Below: the reclusive Malick (right) with Martin Sheen on the set of *Badlands*.



When *The Thin Red Line*, a tale of World War II, unleashes its artillery—including an all-star cast of Sean Penn, Nick Nolte, John Travolta, Woody Harrelson, John Cusack, Bill Pullman, Gary Oldman, George Clooney, and others—in December, expect a 21-gun salute to a hero who seems certain to remain an unseen soldier. The project marks the return, after exactly two decades, of the mysterious director Terrence Malick, whose *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978) are classics. Malick, who declined to speak for this article, has established himself as a sort of cinematic Salinger, as silent as

Garbo, as evasive as the Fugitive. A fleeting presence, like the rare birds he loves to watch, Malick is the kind of seductive talent sought after as much for his elusive-ness as for his eye. He has always been an enigma, one of modern Hollywood's genuine myths. Nobody knows why, at the height of his powers, after those two unforgettable films, he walked away from directing. And nobody knows why he came back. But one thing is definite: offscreen a battle rages about who deserves the credit for bringing Malick home.

Bobby Geisler first met Malick in 1978 when he approached the filmmaker to direct a movie version of David Rabe's play *In the Boom Boom Room*. Geisler—short and cheerful with long, thinning locks and



Letter from L.A.

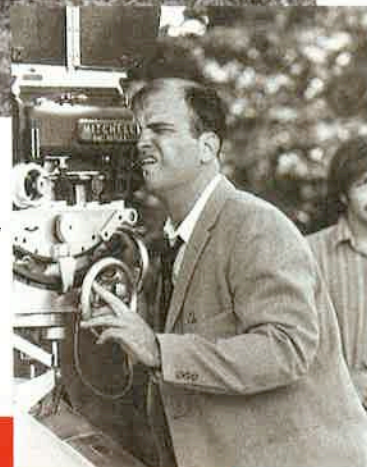
an accent that softly suggests the South—was a novice producer who had been deeply impressed by *Badlands*, which starred then unknowns Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek in a story loosely based on the bloody career of spree killer Charles Starkweather and his girlfriend, Caril Ann Fugate. With its stunning mix of psycho and pastoral, *Badlands* inspired subsequent lovers-on-the-lam films, culminating in Oliver Stone's notorious homage, *Natural Born Killers*, in 1994. *Badlands* made its debut at the New York Film Festival in 1973, overshadowing even Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets*.

Malick turned down the Rabe project. Still, he and Geisler had hit it off and began meeting at Los Angeles restaurants little frequented by celebrities, such as the Hamburger Hamlet on Sunset and Doheny, where they sat in back battling around ideas. Malick, about 35 then, was bearish and bearded. He had the beef-eating habits of a boy raised in Texas and Oklahoma; as he talked he wolfed down hamburgers, two at a time. Malick invariably wore jeans and a seersucker sport coat a little too small for him. It gave him a slightly Chaplinesque air. Geisler kidded him that it looked like the seersucker jacket that Kit Caruthers—Sheen's Starkweather surrogate—stole from a rich man's house in *Badlands*.

For 18 months or so, well into 1979, Geisler and Malick worked on a project based on the life of Joseph Merrick, the 19th-century British sideshow celebrity who suffered from a rare, debilitating disease. One day Geisler was stunned to receive an invitation to a screening of *Days of Heaven*, Malick's new picture. The director had never mentioned it.

Featuring Richard Gere in his first big role, along with Sam Shepard and Brooke Adams, *Days of Heaven* was a brutal shoot, complicated by conflict between the director and its temperamental male lead, as well as by savage battles between Malick and the producers, Bert and Harold Schneider. Linda Palevsky, then married to Malick's friend and patron, computer millionaire Max Palevsky, recalls, "Terry's quite mad, and he had this notion of wanting to make the perfect movie. He used to describe the kind of purity he wanted—he would say things like 'You have

PRESENCE OF MALICK
From above, Martin Sheen as gun-crazy Kit with Sissy Spacek in *Badlands*; director-writer Terrence Malick frames one of the film's startling shots; Brooke Adams and Sam Shepard in *Days of Heaven*.



"Terry had this notion of wanting to make the perfect movie. If he couldn't, there was no point."



a drop of water on a pond, that moment of perfection.' That's the kind of quality he expected from the work he did, and if he couldn't do that, then there was no point making a movie. You'd say to Terry, 'You really ought to go into therapy,' and he'd say, 'If I go to therapy, I'll lose my creative [juice].'"

The picture languished in the editing room for nearly two years, partly because Malick wouldn't or couldn't make decisions. Says Paul Ryan, who shot second unit on the film, "Terry's not one to draw things to a close." Confounding the doubters, *Days of Heaven* emerged as a testimony to Malick's artistic persistence, a dark

jewel of a film, acclaimed for its stunning imagery, even by critics who found its meager narrative elliptical. The movie was nominated for four Oscars (winning the best-cinematography award) and impressed Charles Bluhdorn, the colorful head of Paramount's parent company,

Gulf & Western, who fell in love with Malick's melancholy tone and dreamy landscapes. Bluhdorn gave him a production deal. Still, Malick seemed to feel he had failed at what he had set out to do.

Geisler's Merrick project never wound up on Malick's Paramount agenda. When director David Lynch announced his Merrick project, *The Elephant Man*, Malick and Geisler shelved

theirs—and quickly lost touch. Still, Malick had made a lasting impression on the producer. "I thought Terry was a genius, an artist, and I was completely mesmerized by him," Geisler says. "I felt better when I was with him, and more than anything I wanted to learn from him, swore that I would produce a play or a movie of Terry's if it was the last thing that I did."

Exhausted and bruised by *Days of Heaven*, Malick spent considerable time with his girlfriend, Michie Gleason, in Paris. While she directed a film called *Broken English*, he labored in their Rue Jacob apartment on his new script, tentatively entitled *Q*. Its prologue, which dramatized the origins of life, became increasingly elaborate and would ultimately take over the rest of the story.

Malick shuttled between Paris and Los Angeles, where he hired a small crew, including cameraman Ryan and special-effects consultant Richard Taylor, who worked intensely for a year or so to realize Malick's vision. "He wanted to do something different, get images nobody had ever seen before," recalls Ryan. In one version, the story began with a sleeping god, underwater, dreaming of the origins of the universe, starting with the big bang and moving forward, as fluorescent fish swam into the deity's nostrils and out again.

"Terry was one of the coolest guys I ever worked with," says Taylor. "He had a passion for trying to do things from the heart."

The amount of work we produced was phenomenal." Malick dispatched cameramen all over the world—to the Great Barrier Reef to shoot micro jellyfish, to Mount Etna to shoot volcanic action, to Antarctica to shoot ice shelves breaking off. "He was writing pages of poetry, with no dialogue, glorious visual descriptions," Ryan continues. "Every few months, Paramount would say, 'What are you doing?' He'd give them 30 pages that would keep them happy for a while. But eventually they said, 'Send us a script that starts with page one and at the end says, 'The End.' We don't care what it is, but do something.' Terry's somebody who always functioned very well from the

now and then he called friends. On one occasion he exclaimed to Ryan, "I have a great idea. We're gonna give cameras to people who are just coming out of insane asylums, and let them film. You think that's nuts, but it's not. I'm deadly serious about this."

One day in 1980 or 1981, Malick's landlord introduced him to Michèle, a tall,

cident in which his wife was killed. Chris was badly burned.

Larry, the youngest, went to Spain to study with the guitar virtuoso Segovia. Terry discovered in the summer of 1968 that Larry had broken his own hands, seemingly despondent over his lack of progress. Emil, concerned, went to Spain and returned with Larry's body; it appeared the young man had committed suicide. Like most relatives of those who take their own lives, Terry must have borne a heavy burden of irrational guilt. According to Michèle, the subject of Larry was never mentioned.

Malick was worshiped by his family. He was devoted to his mother. (For years he wouldn't allow her to read the script of *The Thin Red Line* because of the profanity.) But he had terrible fights with his father, often over trivial issues. Even at the

age of 50, according to Michèle, he still argued with Emil over whether he should wear a tie to church. Another bone of contention was family photographs. Malick's father loved to take pictures, but it made Terry uncomfortable. (Malick's contract with Twentieth Century Fox prevents his likeness from being used to promote *The Thin Red Line*.)

Michèle did her best to adapt to Austin. Malick took her on bird-watching expeditions to Big Bend National Park in south Texas. But she was out of her element. Although Terry, who spoke softly and slowly, tried to avoid confrontations, he shared his father's temper. According to Michèle, Terry loved to debate abstract intellectual issues but had very rigid ideas about how domestic life ought to be lived. He did not brook contradiction.

The first real fight he and Michèle had was over buying a television, which she thought Alex, who was 11 or so by then, needed to help acclimate her to a foreign country. Malick, who has the habit of casting his likes, dislikes, and personal eccentricities as matters of principle, argued that TV was trash, that it would ruin the child. (When traveling, Malick often had the TV removed from his hotel rooms, and when that wasn't possible, covered it.) Michèle wouldn't relent—and there was a blow-up. At difficult times like these, Malick would often just leave, for hours, days, or weeks. She never knew where he went, and it made her crazy.

Malick had other eccentricities. He was compulsively neat and possessive about his things. Michèle says she was not allowed to cross the threshold of his office. If she wanted to read one of his books, he pre-

"I had a meeting with Malick. He was getting up every five minutes and hiding; he kept thinking he saw somebody."



MALCONTENTS

Filmmaker Terrence Malick in 1992 with his then wife, Michèle Malick, and John Roberdeau and Bobby Geisler, the producers who nurtured *The Thin Red Line*. During his marriage to Michèle, Malick would disappear for days or weeks at a time without letting her know where he was.

underground position. Suddenly, everybody was looking at him. . . . He did not work well under those conditions. He didn't want to be on the spot."

Taylor adds: "Then one Monday, Terry never showed up. He didn't call anybody, we couldn't find him—we got worried that maybe something had happened to him. Finally, after about two weeks, we got a phone call. He was in Paris, and he said, 'I'm not sure if I'm going to make this picture. Maybe you should just pack all that stuff up.' He just stopped. It was disappointing. I had never put my heart into a project as much as I did that one."

Malick's relationship with Gleason ended, leaving him as bitter and disillusioned personally as he had become professionally. Still, he liked Paris and was spending more time there. Every

thirtysomething blonde Parisienne who lived in the same building. She had a young daughter, Alexandra. Michèle had never met anyone like Malick. "He takes you places where you never go with regular people," she says. "He's interested in everything from ants and plants and flowers and grass to philosophy. And it's not superficial. He reads all the time and remembers everything. He's got this incredible charm . . . something interior."

Malick, friends surmised, was trying to fashion a normal life far from Hollywood. Michèle had become part of that. She thought of herself as average, unglamorous. She cooked and did dishes while Malick played father to Alex. Occasionally, they attended Mass. Always preoccupied with faith and religion, Malick knows the Bible well.

In a year or two, the trio moved to Austin, Texas, where Terry had attended prep school, St. Stephen's Episcopal, in Westlake Hills. He had been a star football player and outstanding student. His parents, whom he and Michèle visited often, lived by then in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Terry's father, Emil, was an oil geologist of Lebanese extraction ("Malick" means "king" in Arabic) who worked for Phillips Petroleum. His mother, Irene, is Irish and grew up on a farm in the Chicago area.

The Malicks were a family of secrets, marked by tragedy. Terry was the oldest of three boys. Chris, the middle son, had been involved in a terrible automobile ac-

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Letter from L.A.

ferred to buy another copy rather than lend his own. It was difficult for her to figure out what he was reading, anyway: he always placed books cover down. When he listened to music, he used a Walkman and rarely left cassettes faceup.

Malick didn't discuss his film work with Michèle, telling her, "I want my personal life to be completely separate from the movies." Although once in a while she read his scripts, mostly he wouldn't tell her what he was working on, and she was not supposed to ask. Occasionally, Malick went to Los Angeles, and every so often he took Michèle along. She met a few of his friends. Malick and Michèle had married in 1985, but no one in L.A. had known of the wedding, or even of their relationship. She felt she had ceased to exist.

Alex had become sassy and rebellious. But Malick was very strict. Not only was there no TV, there was no candy, no telephone. The stricter he became, the more the teenager acted out. Michèle was not strong enough to protect her. One day, Terry and Michèle found Alex gone. She had apparently gotten her father to send her a ticket to France. She was only 15 at the time.

Malick's production deal with Paramount had ended in 1983 after the sudden death of Charles Bluhdorn. He supported himself by writing the occasional script. He did something for Louis Malle and also completed a rewrite of a Robert Dillon script called *Countryman* for producers Edward Lewis and Robert Cortes in 1984. "I couldn't communicate with him directly," recalls Cortes. "I would make a phone call to a certain number, leave a message, and then his brother would call me back." Once, Malick and Cortes actually met face-to-face at Universal executive Ned Tanen's home in Santa Monica Canyon. After the meeting, Cortes offered to give him a lift. "He was very cryptic about where to drop him off," Cortes continues. "I let him out at the corner of Wilshire and Seventh or somewhere. He waited for me to drive away, and then he just walked off."

Mike Medavoy, who then headed production at Orion Pictures and who had been Malick's agent, hired the director to write a script for *Great Balls of Fire!* Malick also did a rewrite of a script based on Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*. In 1986, Rob Cohen, then head of Taft-Barish Productions, hired him to adapt Larry McMurtry's *The Desert Rose* for Barry Levinson to direct. "Malick was someone who was listening to a high whine in his head," recalls Cohen. "He was very tense and fragile, the least likely person to be a director. I once had to have a meeting with him in Westwood. He was getting up

every five minutes and hiding behind pillars; he kept thinking he saw somebody he knew. He would call me, and I'd hear trucks rolling by on the highway, and I'd say, 'Where are you?' and he'd answer, 'I'm walking to Oklahoma!' 'What do you mean, you're walking to Oklahoma? From Texas?' 'Yeah, I'm looking at birds.'"

By the time Geisler reconnected with Malick in 1988, the producer was teamed up with another Texan, John Roberdeau, who had grown up in Austin. Roberdeau was also a Malick devotee, who had committed *Days of Heaven* to memory—every shot, every cut, every scrap of dialogue. Geisler and Roberdeau have a mixed reputation in the film and theater community. They are praised by many for their taste and generosity to artists, but disliked by others for their tireless self-promotion and record of running up bad debts. At the time they met Mal-

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ick, they had produced several plays—including a Broadway production of Eugene O'Neill's five-hour drama, *Strange Interlude*, on Broadway with Glenda Jackson. But, after a decade in the business, they had completed only one movie, *Streamers* (in 1983). Robert Altman, the film's cantankerous director, had grown so frustrated with the pair's interference that the relationship completely broke down.

Geisler and Roberdeau approached Malick about writing and directing a picture based on D. M. Thomas's novel *The White Hotel*, a vividly erotic story of the Freudian analysis of a woman who dies in a concentration camp. In a characteristic display of largesse, they offered him \$2 million, which they didn't yet have. Malick declined, but went on to concede that it might be time he went back to movies. Geisler recalls Malick's saying that if the two producers would be patient they could walk down that path together. Malick told them he would be willing to write an adaptation of Molière's *Tartuffe*—a classic farce—or James Jones's World War II saga *The Thin Red Line*, a sequel of sorts to *From Here to Eternity*. Geisler and

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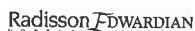
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Roberdeau sensibly chose the latter and paid Malick \$250,000 to write a script.

Malick sent Geisler and Roberdeau a first draft in late May of 1989. The producers flew to Paris and met up with the director and his wife on the Pont Saint-Louis, a bridge which connects the precincts of Notre Dame to the Île Saint-Louis. In a gesture both thoughtful and seductive, they gave the Malicks a silver flask from Tiffany on which was inscribed a sergeant's chevron and one of their favorite lines from the Jones novel: "Billions of hard, bright stars shone with relentless glitter across the tropic night sky." They had dinner at the Brasserie de l'Île Saint-Louis, where Jones, who had died in 1977, and his wife, Gloria, had often lunched. The foursome walked up the Quai d'Orléans to No. 10, where Jones had lived, and Malick bowed before the former home of the master.

At Le Jardin des Plantes and other sites around Paris they settled in to discuss the script. Geisler had prepared 400 notes, and he believes his seriousness impressed Malick. "Had we not delivered 400 notes," Geisler maintains, "had we just said, 'Thanks for the screenplay, we'll be in touch later,' he would not have directed it. It was because we were in this dialogue that he did."

"The notion that we discussed endlessly," Geisler continues, "was that Malick's Guadalcanal would be a Paradise Lost, an Eden, raped by the green poison, as Terry used to call it, of war. Much of the violence was to be portrayed indirectly. A soldier is shot, but rather than showing a Spielbergian bloody face we see a tree explode, the shredded vegetation, and a gorgeous bird with a broken wing flying out of the tree."

Malick had agonized about every deviation from Jones's novel, no matter how trivial. He asked Gloria Jones's permission for the smallest changes. Eventually she told him, "Terry, you have my husband's voice, you're writing in his musical key; now what you must do is improvise. Play riffs on this."

Malick ultimately fashioned a remarkable script, infused with his own sensibility. But he had made some questionable choices. He retained several of Jones's more conventional situations, but dropped some interesting elements, including the suggestion of a homoerotic undertow among some of the characters. Later, he changed Stein, a Jewish captain, to Staros, an officer of Greek extraction, thereby gutting Jones's indictment of anti-Semitism in the military, which the novelist had observed close-up in his own company.

On the final night of the producers' visit, over dinner at the Café de Flore, in a dramatic appeal he had rehearsed ahead of

time, Geisler beseeched Malick to direct the script himself, and assured him that he and his partner would wait forever if necessary. According to Geisler, Malick agreed.

But the director left open numerous doors through which he might make a hasty exit. Always cautious, he wasn't about to enter into any ironclad commitments. The producers realized that although they had hooked their fish, it was far from reeled in. "It was important that we find a way to remain in continual touch with Terry," Geisler says, candid about his efforts to cement the relationship. "The best way to do that was to commission him to develop another project." In late 1989, although Malick had never before written a play and was not much interested in the stage, he suggested adapting the story which had been the basis for the great Kenji Mizoguchi film *Sanshō the Bailiff* for the theater. Geisler and Roberdeau agreed to pay him \$200,000, plus a \$50,000 bonus, which Malick would collect the night the play opened on Broadway.

The producers plunged into the re-

"You get caught up in the beauty of what Malick's saying, but fundamentally it was hard to get him to commit to things."

search, supplying Malick with anything and everything he needed. And often, expensively, going him one better. No script existed for the Mizoguchi film, so they had it transcribed and translated by both a Japanese linguist who spoke English and an American who spoke Japanese. (Debates over particularly enigmatic areas of the text were also incorporated.) The producers excavated 10th-century literature written in ancient Japanese—travel sketches and diaries. They taped Japanese children who were the same age as the children in the script, speaking Malick's lines, so he could hear what they sounded like.

The three men became what the producers considered to be close friends. Geisler corresponded with Emil Malick, sending him newspaper clippings on subjects of interest to him, and even two city guides to Washington, D.C., on the eve of

Letter from L.A.

a visit. When Roberdeau's brother was diagnosed with leukemia, Malick offered to donate his bone marrow. Even though the producers had other projects—they had enlisted the now deceased Dennis Potter to write *The White Hotel*—Malick was the focus. Claims Geisler, "We behaved like family toward each other. We liked each other, I thought, loved each other. He was the center and circumference of our lives."

Occasionally, the trio converged on Los Angeles. At the Beverly Hills Hotel, Malick asked them to request one of the first-floor rooms in the back, with the patios. Rather than use the valet, he parked on Crescent Drive, adjacent to the hotel, and instead of walking through the lobby, he crossed the grounds and entered from the rear, hopping over the little patio fence, rapping on the plate-glass door for admittance. Says Roberdeau, "It was as if he was Greta Garbo or something."

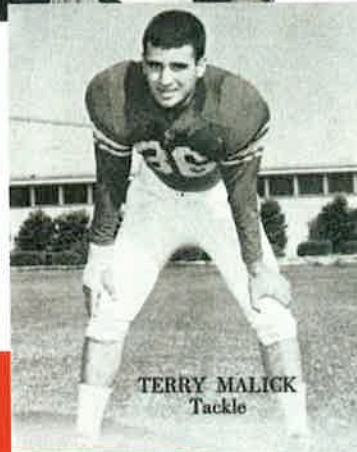
The producers' friends told them that they were crazy, that Malick would never finish a project. But, says Geisler, "I thought we were working with a guy who was one of the few true artists of the 20th century. It wasn't an easy day's work, but it was a great day's work. Terry was the Holy Grail. He was thought to be unfindable, unapproachable, unconvincible. Others had failed; we would be successful. We realized how much that might mean to our careers."

Malick, still not entirely won over, had plenty of caveats. For a long time he would not allow the producers to keep a sample of his handwriting. They say original copies of documents bearing his penmanship were to be returned to him with no copies made. Handwritten notes were to be destroyed. It reminded Roberdeau of *Badlands*, in which Sheen's character would never sign his name the same way twice out of fear of forgery.

Geisler and Roberdeau practiced what they called "method producing," which consisted of elaborate (and expensive) trips, flying to San Francisco to see the Kodo Drummers, visiting an Asian collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and then heading on to Grafton, Vermont, for a *Sanshō the Bailiff* editing session while they ate cheese soup and watched the leaves turn. They booked Malick into the best hotels, reserved tables at the finest restaurants. Sometimes he took such first-class service for granted, but occasionally he balked, tried to plan his own trips, or rejected a car. They sent it anyway.



OPENING SCENES
Above, Terry Malick (third from right), who attended school in Austin, Texas, in a high-school play at St. Stephen's Episcopal School; right, the future director, who excelled at football. Both photos are taken from his school's 1961 yearbook.



"Terry takes you places you never go with regular people. He's interested in everything from ants and grass to philosophy."

One day in the fall of 1990, Malick told the producers he had long been working on a script called *The English-Speaker*, based upon Dr. Josef Breuer's well-known 19th-century case study of Anna O., a hysteric. In Malick's silent world of secrets, this script was especially personal, private. He would allow no one but Geisler to read it. Of the project, the producer says, "It's as if he had ripped open his heart and bled his true feelings onto the page." It is indeed a remarkable script, *The Exorcist* as written by Dostoyevsky. So when Malick said, "Let's do this," Geisler and Roberdeau, drunk on his prose poetry, agreed, paying him \$400,000.

Late in the summer of 1990, Malick had turned in the first draft of *Sanshō the Bailiff*. The producers knew it wasn't quite there yet, but in early 1991 they sent it out to directors Peter Brook, Peter Stein, and Ingmar Bergman. Each turned it down. Undeterred, the producers conceived the ambitious notion of staging the play as a workshop and inviting the

participation of the world's masters of set design, sound, lighting, and choreography. But they still needed a director.

In August 1992, Geisler and Roberdeau, along with the Malicks—who by that time were estranged and living separately—met up at the music festival in Salzburg. They were impressed by the great Andrzej Wajda's staging of the Polish classic *Wesele* and were familiar with Wajda's celebrated trilogy—*A Generation*, *Kanal*, and *Ashes and Diamonds*—a masterpiece of world cinema.

Wajda had never heard of Malick, but flew to New York in October to screen *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* at the Tribeca Film Center. Afterward, at a nearby restaurant, he agreed to direct *Sanshō the Bailiff*. The tables

were covered with butcher paper, and Wajda drew a picture with crayons. He inscribed it, "For Terry from Andrzej Wajda." Geisler was so excited, he called Malick in Austin, saying: "Next stop, Warsaw!"

On a cold and wintry December evening of the same year, the Malicks and the producers converged on Wajda's family home in Warsaw. Faded photographs of ancestors and war heroes illuminated by flickering candles in sconces peered down at them from the green enameled walls as they shared a traditional dinner with Wajda and his wife, actress Krystyna Zachwatowicz, two enormous dogs, and various friends and relatives who dropped by.

Malick, who detests beets and fish with bones—or even the appearance of bones—seemed ill at ease as the guests hungrily attacked the three beet dishes (pickled and roasted beets, as well as borscht), four varieties of herring, along with kasha, duck, and 10 or so other delicacies. The meal was washed down with generous quantities of Polish vodka, which Malick drank sparingly.

Wajda felt that the play required substantial revision. He expected Malick to roll up his shirtsleeves and do more, do better. Sitting by the roaring fire after the sumptuous meal, Wajda turned to Malick and said, "Terry, what you need to do to *Sanshō the Bailiff* is make it more like Shakespeare."

Recalls Geisler, "That was the beginning of the end."

The workshop was budgeted at \$600,000. As the first day approached, the

producers' long-suffering backers abruptly pulled out. Still, the show went on. True to their word, Geisler and Roberdeau did manage to gather some remarkable international talents, including lighting designer Jennifer Tipton, sound designer Hans Peter Kuhn, and a collection of fine Asian-American actors. But the six-week workshop, held at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in November of 1993, was a bust.

The relationship between Malick and Wajda quickly deteriorated. A few days into the workshop, Michèle arrived from Paris to see her husband. To her, it seemed that Wajda was threatened by Malick's presence. Malick thought Wajda didn't understand his play; he was frustrated by how little the director was bringing to it. He was angered by what he regarded as Wajda's condescending attitude—"You, boy, go do your rewrites."

Wajda spoke English to Geisler and Roberdeau, but never a word to Malick, with whom he conversed through translators. He was annoyed that Malick had not done the work he wanted. Malick insisted on doing it his way, but he wasn't the director. Says Kuhn, "Terry didn't know anything about theater, and he was not interested in learning. He was very stubborn."

On the last day, just after Michèle returned to Paris, Malick asked the producers for a limo. Geisler and Roberdeau were puzzled; he had never asked for a car and chauffeur before. They were flabbergasted when they saw it was for Ecky Wallace, an Austin woman who was an old friend of Malick's from St. Stephen's. Later, she became Malick's girlfriend.

The workshop cost \$800,000, alienated Malick, and left the producers devastated, although it was a disaster of their own making. The play just wasn't ready. Geisler and Roberdeau were besieged by angry creditors—BAM, caterers, travel agents, publicists, restaurants. The partners were dead broke. They sold their furniture to meet their payroll; Roberdeau sold CDs and books so they could eat. One creditor managed to have Geisler arrested. He was led from his town house in handcuffs, marched down West Ninth Street in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, and thrown in jail overnight for grand larceny, a charge that was later dismissed. (In April 1996, Geisler and Roberdeau were evicted from the home they shared.)

Says Roberdeau, "It was ridiculous. We were sitting on all these assets that we had sunk our money, blood, and time into. It was time to put Terry on notice." In December, they began to press Terry about

which of the two movie projects would go first, *The English-Speaker* or *The Thin Red Line*. Geisler, who was closer to Malick, played the good cop, Roberdeau the bad. The latter angrily told the director, "Don't pretend you're not a participant in all of this." But, says Geisler, Malick blithely refused "to take any responsibility whatsoever. Our problems were our problems. He had forewarned us in the beginning that his timetable would be his timetable, and if we were still standing by the time

"It was a great day's work. Terry was the Holy Grail . . . unfindable, unapproachable, unconvincible."

that he got around to directing one or both of the movies, that would be great."

In January 1995, the producers sent Malick a note, begging him to allow them to approach Mike Medavoy, who was in the process of setting up his own company, Phoenix Pictures, to finance *The English-Speaker* and/or *The Thin Red Line*. They say Malick never answered. Geisler and Roberdeau borrowed money for tickets and flew to Los Angeles, arriving in a teeming rainstorm. Fallen trees blocked the narrow roads that thread the canyons of Beverly Hills. Later the two men came to feel that they had ignored a portent of biblical proportions. But Medavoy agreed to give them \$100,000 to secure the project for his company; he said he would back *The Thin Red Line* with the other two men serving as producers.

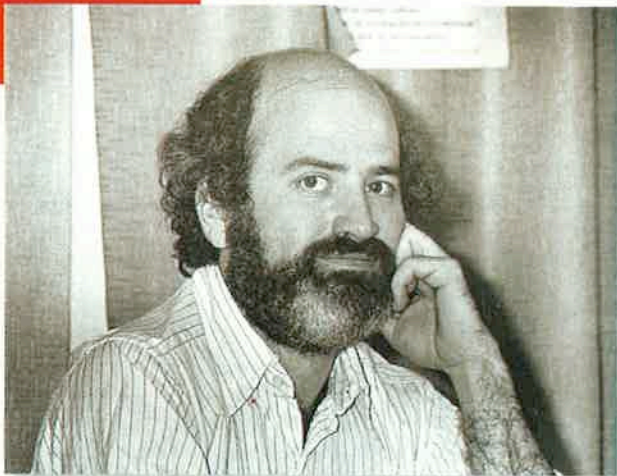
But *Sanshō the Bailiff* had badly damaged the relationship between Malick and the producers. Geisler and Roberdeau, terrified, made herculean efforts to mend fences. By the following year, Malick's wounds had apparently begun to heal, and the three men again professed affection for one another. Geisler and Roberdeau say that Malick asked them to hire him to adapt *A Tale of Two Cities* for the stage.

The producers spoke between themselves about how to keep the pressure on, how to steer Malick away from theater and toward starting *The Thin Red*

Line. At the time, the feeling was that since the film's message was that war dehumanized the G.I.'s and made them anonymous, stars would not be used in the picture. The producers sent their two assistants on weekend trips to the Midwest to scout fresh faces, corn-fed boys at spelling bees and debating contests. It was expensive, but it was a way of moving Malick forward.

March of 1995 brought a reading of *The Thin Red Line* at Medavoy's home. The Malick magic worked its spell. The reading included Martin Sheen delivering the screen directions, Kevin Costner, Will Patton, Dermot Mulroney, Peter Berg, and Lukas Haas.

Malick was nervous. His face was flushed. He had prepared some remarks, but when he stood up his mind



OUT OF LINE

Terrence Malick in May 1979, at the Cannes festival, where he was promoting *Days of Heaven*. Malick's contract with Twentieth Century Fox stipulates that his image cannot be used in the promotion of *The Thin Red Line*.

went blank. He was deeply embarrassed and looked as if he just wanted to survive to the end. Observes Roberdeau, "He was in his element, but he was painfully aware that everybody was looking at him as the master. This was a kind of coming-out." The fact that Malick turned up at all was a symbolic gesture that somehow made *The Thin Red Line* official. But there was still a long road ahead.

In June, a five-day workshop was scheduled, also at Medavoy's. A few weeks before it was due to begin, Malick said he couldn't sleep at night; he was worried that Geisler and Roberdeau might produce *Sanshō the Bailiff* before he finished it, directed by someone else. They say he demanded that

CONTINUED ON PAGE 217

Letter from L.A.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 214 his producers relinquish all rights to the play to him. Geisler says, "Terry would have drawn a line in the sand, and *The Thin Red Line* wouldn't be happening today." By this time, they had invested nearly \$1 million and a decade's effort in *The Thin Red Line*. They agreed to his terms.

Plans for the film workshop proceeded. One day Brad Pitt dropped by. Malick met Johnny Depp at the Book Soup Bistro, on Sunset. Recalls Geisler, "Depp basically said to Malick, 'Let's sign this napkin; you tell me where to show up, when, what to play.' After Depp and Pitt provided the affirmation Terry needed, it was easier to get him to meet with other actors." But there was a downside to stars;

At the Beverly Hills Hotel, Malick would enter from the rear. "It was as if he was Greta Garbo or something," says Roberdeau.

Geisler told the suddenly starstruck director, "You're going to compromise the movie." Finally Malick gave in. According to a source, Malick said, "The audience will know that Pitt's going to wake up after his death scene and collect his \$1 million."

But word had gotten out that Costner, Pitt, and Depp were up for roles in *The Thin Red Line*, and a feeding frenzy began among male actors. Geisler and Roberdeau were even getting calls from actresses. "There are no actresses in it," Roberdeau told one agent. "There's only a photograph of a woman in one scene." Without missing a beat, the agent said, "She'll play that! She'll be the photograph."

Pre-production moved slowly, with Malick displaying his characteristic reluctance to make decisions. Says a source, "It was hard for him to say something definite. He would couch [his ambivalence] in a way that was very compelling on the surface, all about being delicate, and he speaks so idiomatically that sometimes you get caught up in the beauty of what he's saying, but fundamentally it was hard to get him to commit to things." He met with scores of actors, told each of them, "There is no one whom I admire more."

Around the beginning of 1996, Malick

phoned Michèle in Paris and told her he wanted a divorce. It did not come as a complete surprise. There had been problems since her days in Austin. But she claims when she had asked Malick if things had changed between them, he had always said, "No, no, no."

Malick was inching toward production, but there were still unresolved issues. As soon as Medavoy got involved, Geisler says, a turf war broke out. It was one that, without Malick's support, Geisler and Roberdeau would inevitably lose. Medavoy says he welcomed the participation of Geisler and Roberdeau. "I did everything to keep them on," he says. "I took them out to lunch. I said, 'Here's your chance to really learn how to make a movie.'"

But Geisler and Roberdeau had no experience with a project of this scale. Medavoy hired his friend, veteran producer George Stevens Jr., whom Malick had known and liked since the late 60s. (Stevens had invested in *Badlands*.) He was to supervise the production, which would largely take place in Queensland, Australia, and cost about \$55 million.

Medavoy asked Geisler and Roberdeau to share their producers' credit with Stevens. They refused.

In the fall of 1996, according to Geisler, Malick called him and said that he was once again having trouble sleeping. Now he was worried about *The English-Speaker*. He feared that, since his exclusive five-year directing option had lapsed at the end of 1995, the producers might turn it over to another director.

"I thought he wanted me to say a few words of love and reassurance," recalls Geisler. But he says Malick made it clear that he would not proceed with *The Thin Red Line* unless the producers extended his right to direct *The English-Speaker* in perpetuity. The producers refused.

"Terry said that if we ultimately produced one of the three projects with him, we should feel ourselves lucky," Geisler remembers, summing up an exchange with Malick. "I said, 'You're scaring me now, because you're making me feel as if you have no intention ever of developing *Sanshô* or directing *The English-Speaker*, which was not the spirit in which these other projects were commissioned.'"

Medavoy agreed with them, told Malick that if he felt so strongly about *The English-Speaker* he should buy the script back or enter into a partnership with the producers. But Malick was adamant, denied he had any ulterior motives, and held out a carrot. Again, according to Geisler, he said, "We'll clean our wound to the bone, proceed together on *The Thin Red Line* without doubt

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Letter from L.A.

or suspicion. We will now be speaking pilot to pilot. I don't want to jump out and see that you're still on the plane. We'll be able to jump out of the plane together." Roberdeau broke in, saying, "I feel like I've already jumped out of the plane. I'm on the ground with my legs broken."

Geisler consoled himself with fantasies about the glorious day when *The Thin Red Line* would finally open, "A Terrence Malick picture, produced by Robert Geisler and John Roberdeau." He explains: "During those years of stress, selling furniture and books and CDs, I got through it because I said, 'Bring Malick back and, oh, what a day it will be. What a reward we'll have. We'll stand shoulder to shoulder, speak pilot to pilot.'"

Principal photography was to begin on June 23, 1997. Phoenix had a deal with Sony, which was slated to co-finance the picture. Geisler and Roberdeau learned from a story in *Variety* that Sony president John Calley had pulled his company out of the film. They say they faxed the article to Malick in Australia, where he was scouting locations. He flew to Los Angeles immediately and pressed Medavoy, who admitted he didn't have the financing. Geisler and Roberdeau claim that Malick was furious with his old friend, and asked them if, contractually, he could take the film away from Medavoy.

Medavoy responds, "I don't know if that's true or not, because Terry never mentioned it to me. I had told Terry that we ran the risk of not doing it at Sony, and since he was in Australia and unavailable, I waited until he got back to tell him that it wasn't going to be Sony, but that we would find another distributor."

In any event, Malick, Medavoy, and Stevens (*sans* Geisler and Roberdeau) were obliged to pitch the project, something Malick had hoped to avoid. Fox 2000 president Laura Ziskin agreed to pick up the film, but required the presence of some stars. They would play supporting roles while lower-wattage actors, such as Elias Koteas, Adrien Brody, and Jim Caviezel, took on the main parts. The last stone had been cleared from the path.

"In May of 1997, we were working our hearts out in New York, and I saw that people were beginning to move to Australia," says Geisler. "We called Phoenix. Under no circumstances were we to be in Australia, ever! I called Terry and said,



THE PLAY'S THE THING
Above, Terrence Malick with actors in *Sanshō the Bailiff* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1993; left, Mike Medavoy, whose Phoenix Pictures made *The Thin Red Line*.

"Malick had forewarned us in the beginning that his timetable would be his timetable."

"What we just heard doesn't square with either our recent situation, in which you seemed to rely upon me, if not hourly, at least every other day, nor our relationship over the last 10 or 20 years.' We just wanted the pleasure of seeing him say 'Action!' for the first time in 20 years, feeling we had earned that, and he would not be there were it not for John and me.

"Basically he said I should be grateful to him for directing this movie. It was not what he expected to direct, he didn't want to, he was doing it only for me. I said, 'Terry, this is going to sound melodramatic and biblical, but let me put it to you like this: I feel like Moses. I led this fucking movie through the desert, and now the fun starts, everybody else is walking into the promised land.' He said, 'Bobby, there is no one for whom I have more admiration than you. No one speaks the truth to me like you do, Bobby.'" Essentially, says Geisler, Malick blamed it on Medavoy.

Geisler continues, "To be really theatrical about it, this sums up my whole life with Terry Malick." He takes out a small manila envelope and turns it upside down,

spilling a handful of brightly colored pills, like M&Ms, onto the table. He slowly counts out 17, some of which are vitamins. "Several years ago, I didn't take anything," he says. "My face has started falling off. High blood pressure, diabetes, I got fat, I drink too much. I'm never going to get over this. We were co-dependent. I don't like to think this about myself, but we were members of a cult." Adds Roberdeau, "We were the high priests of it. I'm the cardinal of Bobby's Malick cult."

Disputes between directors and producers are, as is well known, common in the film business. But what happened next was a little strange. Several journalists visited the set, among them Josh Young from *Entertainment Weekly*. Shortly thereafter, Young received a copy of a peculiar statement from the set on *The Thin Red Line* stationery, and a later letter, unsigned. The statement said, in part: "Bobby Geisler and John Roberdeau are imposters and confidence men who have no connection with Mr. Malick and who have had only a distant one in the past. Journalists should beware of letting these tricksters promote their own careers by using Mr. Malick's name..." The letter attacks them for crediting themselves "as the reason [Malick] has returned to filmmaking," and credits Ecky Wallace instead.

It seems extremely unlikely that Malick would have lent himself to so bizarre an exercise as this one. But regardless of who wrote the statement, it reflects the sentiments of the people around Malick. Says Medavoy, "The [producers] were really resourceful in getting to Terry and putting the impetus into it, but I don't think they convinced him to make the movie, maybe Ecky did. I don't know. But one thing's for sure: he came to it himself, and it wasn't about money, it was about passion."

Says Clayton Townsend, Oliver Stone's producer, who worked on pre-production,

Letter from L.A.

"Geisler and Roberdeau are two guys who live in their own world. They're very pretentious fellows and take great pride in their paper presentations. They just had a knack for putting on a lot of people along the way. I tried to stay clear of them."

Adds one source, "There are a lot of people Geisler and Roberdeau owed money to. The fact is, they might have had the police after them if this picture hadn't been set up. They are the great spenders of the Western world. They didn't have enough money to pay for the office help, but you ask them to go out and get you a list of actors and they Federal Express you a book full of pictures in a \$200 binder. The two guys are trying to get their careers started on Terry. They wore out their welcome."

Adds another source, "It wasn't that they were banned from the set. They hadn't been involved for a year prior to the shooting, except in their own minds. They're people Terry got involved with and wishes he hadn't. Terry said that not only did they not bring him back, their being around was discouraging him from coming back."

The source adds that Geisler and Roberdeau were working at cross-purposes with Phoenix. For example, he claims that the production was waiting for the delivery of uniforms, which never came. When the supplier was called, he said he had been fired by Roberdeau. (Geisler

denies this.) Another source says that Geisler and Roberdeau were asked to give Adrien Brody, an actor they had recommended, a tape of *Il Posto*, a film that Malick wanted him to see. Instead they arranged a screening and dinner at the Royalton Hotel in New York for a dozen people. Malick was reportedly furious that they had "improved" on his instruction.

Adrien Brody plays Fifé, a major character in the novel—Jones modeled him after himself. Now his scenes have been reduced, and the film, not unlike Oliver Stone's 1986 *Platoon*, turns on the conflict between idealism and cynicism as embodied in the clash between two characters—Welsh, who is played by Sean Penn, and Witt, who is played by Jim Caviezel. (Caviezel and Elias Koteas, who plays Staros,

are the two actors whose performances are generating advance praise.)

Although people around Malick now say that it was, among other things, Geisler and Roberdeau's problems with

creditors that estranged the director, their phone logs reveal that he was calling them frequently, often two or three times a day, as much as a year after *The New York Observer* went public with their financial woes, right up to the start of production.

The producers think Malick got rid of them because of their close relationship with Michèle. Says Geisler, "We and Michèle got divorced around the same time. We got the call and Michèle got the call. A chapter was closed and a chapter was opened." Geisler and Roberdeau are contractually allowed to thank four people in the credits. Michèle Malick was one of the people they selected. According to Geisler, when Terry heard about all of this, he threatened to take his name off the picture.

Concludes Geisler, "Terry's writing is obsessed with mercy and sacrifice and love and courage and comradeship, but that just doesn't square with who he is: utterly unmerciful. But great artists are not necessarily always nice people."

The fact is, we'll probably never know the entire truth about this relationship. But one thing is clear: Malick and the

producers, who did manage to retain their screen credit, were made for each other. His genius sparked their ambition; their ambition cleared his path back to filmmaking. Geisler and Roberdeau ensnared Malick in a web of love that he may have come to experience as obligation, and he broke loose. They tried to seduce him, become the circumference of his life, but he seduced them and became the center of theirs. As playwright Charles Mee Jr., who wrote

four drafts of *The White Hotel*, puts it, "When Bobby and John first encounter an artist, they are so appreciative, they are so generous, but there comes a time when they would like some consideration in return, and if they don't get it, they feel dissed. There comes a test of love—that most people fail."

The fact is, the director has returned and, despite his long absence, brought *The Thin Red Line* in on time and on budget. The much discussed result is a "meditation on men and war," as Laura Ziskin calls it, as far from *Saving Private Ryan*, the year's other big war movie, as you can get. "The technical virtuosity of *Saving Private Ryan* is stunning," she continues. "The artistic virtuosity of *The Thin Red Line* is equally stunning. There's a kind of hypnotic quality to Malick's movies, and this one is just mesmerizing." □

"The artistic virtuosity of *The Thin Red Line* is stunning. This one is just mesmerizing."



RED LINERS

Above, Sean Penn, second from left, as Sergeant Welsh in *The Thin Red Line*; right, Bobby Geisler and John Roberdeau, the film's banished producers.