

# A personal tribute to film director Alan Pakula by writer John Nichols

16 December 1998

*American film director Alan Pakula, 70, died in a tragic freak accident November 19. While driving on the Long Island Expressway 35 miles east of New York City a metal pipe lying on the highway was kicked up by another car and crashed through Pakula's windshield. He lost control of his vehicle and crashed into a fence. He was taken to North Shore Hospital in Plainview, New York where he was pronounced dead.*

*Pakula first made his name in Hollywood as a producer for Paramount in 1956 with the film *Fear Strikes Out*, directed by Robert Mulligan. In 1962 he produced the civil rights drama *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the following year, *Love With the Proper Stranger*, both also directed by Mulligan. He directed his first film, *The Sterile Cuckoo* in 1969. He did perhaps his best work in the 1970s, with films such as *Klute* (1971), *The Parallax View* (1974) and *All the President's Men* (1976). Other films include *Sophie's Choice* (1982), *See You in the Morning* (1989), *Presumed Innocent* (1990), *The Pelican Brief* (1993) and *The Devil's Own* (1997).*

*In a letter to WSWs arts editor David Walsh writer John Nichols, author of *The Sterile Cuckoo*, contributed this recollection of Alan Pakula.*

In 1965 or '66 Alan Pakula hired me to write a screenplay of *The Sterile Cuckoo*. I was 25. I went to LA a couple of times and spent long sessions with him and Bob Mulligan (director of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which Alan produced). They were wonderful sessions. Alan was a warm, gentle, intelligent, amazingly hard-working and personable guy. I was surely impressed, as it immediately quered any prejudices about stereotypical Hollywood that I might have harbored.

At the time he and Bob were shooting a picture called *Inside Daisy Clover* with Robert Redford and Natalie Wood. I had fun meeting all those people. One was Roddy McDowall who recently died. Alan was very

interested in my book as a story of young love and loss in some way I gathered he associated with his own life. He was very candid and intimate about his own life and loves during our discussions. He also felt that it was a simple enough story that it might be a good vehicle for him to break into directing. It became the first movie he ever directed and did win for Liza Minnelli an Oscar nomination.

The time I spent with him was like relativity sessions, talking about first love, fear of commitment in relationship, all kinds of stuff. It was interesting and powerful to me as I'd just gotten married. Alan was married to Hope Lange at the time. I remember vividly a dinner at his house, and afterward he walked me through the lush Westwood gated community with swimming pools and palm trees and so forth all about, and I was talking to him about how suddenly, at 25, my life was topsy turvy, I'd published books, gotten married, everything was complex, filled with loose ends, obligations, fear and terror of big-time publishing, publicity, money--it felt to me like my life, certainly my peace and cohesion, was unraveling, I couldn't control things, I was kinda panicked. And he chuckled and told me to get used to it because that was the way my life was going to be from then on out.

He hired me to do a script despite my total lack of experience. Suggested I buy a copy of Horton Foote's published *Mockingbird* script in order to have an example of the form. Then he just let me write it back in New York. I did a sort of treatment or two, and then a script. We talked a lot and I did a rewrite. Eventually he hired another writer, Alvin Sargent, to take over, and that was the script used. I didn't get a credit. Back then it never would have occurred to me that I might have had a right to one. Sargent later became famous for scripts like *Ordinary People* and *Julia*.

Alan shot the movie in and around Hamilton College

where I went to school. Everybody there seemed to love him. He was very considerate and not at all Hollywood, as I understand. I was told that crews went around after every location shot cleaning up, making sure even to pick up every last cigarette butt. He had a great relationship with the college.

I didn't have contact him after that, but, a rarity in Hollywood, in the years to follow I always received an Xmas card from him and his second wife Hannah.

He directed some fine movies like *Klute*, *All the President's Men*, *Sophie's Choice*. He seemed to me like a really decent human being. Obviously, I didn't know him that personally after *The Sterile Cuckoo*. But for a first impression of Hollywood, he was wonderful. Honest, worked like a dog, gentle, very intelligent, compassionate. All my life I've been grateful for that brief couple of year's connection. Part of my good luck in films and career.



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