

1

Out of the Ashes of Despair

The difference [between a director and an auteur] is that a director who is working for a living simply does the job, which may not be akin to his philosophy, but it is not inconsistent to have the same man being both. The word is “hunger.” If you are hungry and nobody will buy your original idea, you might get lucky, direct a Kellogg’s cornflakes commercial and take home a few boxes.

—Mel Brooks, 1971

In the early 1970s, Mel Brooks had reason to find himself in an ironic position as far as his career was concerned. He had already won Academy Awards and Emmys, and had hit radio commercials and three successful comedy albums (such as *The 2000 Year Old Man*). He was a veteran of the writing teams for two of the most cherished series of American television’s golden age: *Your Show of Shows* and *Caesar’s Hour*. Brooks’s recent association with the highly successful sitcom *Get Smart* had enhanced his visibility with the public and given him additional industry credibility. Although his movie *The Twelve Chairs* (1970) had failed to make any tangible impact at the box office, *The Producers* (1968) was well on its way to becoming a cult favorite.

Yet Brooks was now unable to get *any* new show business projects off the ground and into production. How many times, he must have wondered, did he have to crash through the establishment’s barriers before he gained solid acceptance from his peers and the public? How long could he continue to subject himself to the ordeal of starting over—yet again?

For a time, Mel wanted to produce a film version of *She Stoops to Conquer*. He had seen an off-Broadway production of the Restoration-era comedy and hoped to interest Albert Finney in starring in the vehicle, which would be shot in England. (In Brooks's excitement over this potential screen venture, he forgot his recent oath to stick to mainstream projects that could be box-office winners.) However, as it turned out, the period piece did not appeal to Finney or to film studio executives. Brooks had to abandon that idea. This new rejection reinforced to Mel just how much Hollywood had turned a cold shoulder toward him as a movie-maker. Meanwhile, there was brief talk of Mel and Gene Wilder joining the cast of an upcoming MGM comedy, *Every Little Crook and Nanny*. However, when that feature film was shot, others claimed the suggested roles.

While Brooks was vainly searching for a filmmaking deal, he forced himself to keep busy in other aspects of show business, which, at least, would help keep his name alive in the industry. In this mode, Mel took assorted TV gigs, ranging from appearing on Dick Cavett's talk show to being a guest on the game show *Jeopardy!* Brooks also provided the voice of the Blond-Haired Cartoon Man on the PBS-TV animated children's series *The Electric Company*. In the winter of 1973, producer Max Liebman theatrically released the film *10 from Your Show of Shows* (a compilation of restored kinescopes from the beloved TV series), and Brooks and other regulars from that program received renewed media attention and were frequently interviewed. Meanwhile, when Professor Richard Brown taught his filmmakers course at the New York University's School of Continuing Education in Manhattan, Brooks was among the guest speakers, along with such others as Cliff Robertson, Shirley MacLaine, Eli Wallach, and Anne Jackson. When Marlo Thomas packaged her star-studded ABC special *Free to Be . . . You & Me* (1974), an animated children's musical, Brooks provided the voice of a baby boy.

But no matter how Mel tried to gloss over the facts, such activities were largely busywork, and he continued to brood over his inability to step back into the ranks of film directors.

Brooks's luck finally began to change for the better in 1973 when he had an auspicious accidental encounter with talent agent David Begelman on the streets of Manhattan. Later, when Begelman, now his talent representative, first brought the *Tex X* project to Mel's attention, Brooks almost said no to shaping the treatment into a screenplay for Warner

Bros. He argued that it went against his belief that he should only develop his own ideas. Then he came to think better of the timely offer. At the very least, it would get him back to Hollywood and provide a decent paycheck. With a mixture of resignation and a what-the-hell attitude, Mel agreed to give the venture a shot. After all, what did he have to lose at this professional low point?

In setting to work on the *Tex X* screenplay, Brooks heeded his earlier pledge to surround himself with cowriters whenever he next wrote a script. Besides hiring Andrew Bergman—the original author of the screen treatment—Mel brought aboard the writing team of Norman Steinberg and Alan Uger, two men he already knew. Brooks also wanted to have an authentic black voice on the unorthodox project. Efforts to hire the bright, outspoken comedian Dick Gregory failed. Next, Brooks turned to Richard Pryor, a controversial stand-up comic who had already appeared in several film and TV projects. The maverick Pryor agreed to join the young writing squad.

Over the next several months, Mel and his crew labored over their task of creating a wild and wacky comedy that defied conventions and shattered current standards of political correctness. Their rule of thumb was “Go for broke.” Putting a tempting spin on the emerging scenario, Brooks told the media, “It won’t be a ‘black’ movie but more of a juxtaposition of hypocrisy, greed, flat-out fun and clichés that I’ve been watching since I was 3 years old. . . . The point is, we’re trying to use every Western cliché in the book—in the hope that we’ll kill them off in the process.”

Mel explained further, “I decided that this would be a surrealist epic. It was time to take two eyes, the way Picasso had done it, and put them on one side of the nose, because the official movie portrait of the West was simply a lie. For nine months, we worked together like maniacs. We went all the way—especially Richard Pryor, who was very brave and very far-out and very catalytic. I figured my career was finished anyway, so I wrote berserk, heartfelt stuff about white corruption and racism and Bible-thumping bigotry. We used dirty language on the screen for the first time, and to me the whole thing was like a big psychoanalytic session. It just got everything out of me—all of my furor, my frenzy, my insanity, my love of life and hatred of death.”

To Mel’s amazement, the studio was impressed with the finished screenplay—despite its blatant irreverence—and ordered the writing team

to revise a few story-line points and to shorten the lengthy script. Once that was accomplished, the project (now called *Black Bart*) would go onto the active production schedule at Warner Bros. By now, Mel had chanced bringing his wife, Anne Bancroft, and their infant child to Los Angeles, where they moved into a new residence. (Their home was at 1718 Rising Glen Road, in the hills just above West Hollywood. The spacious house boasted huge glass walls overlooking a swimming pool, 12-foot-high iron gates, and a long entrance driveway. The sizable living room easily accommodated a billiard table and massive overstuffed couches.)

Brooks informed the studio that he wanted to cast Richard Pryor in the pivotal role of the film's black sheriff. However, according to Mel, the studio balked at this choice. Supposedly, the executives claimed that Pryor lacked "sufficient" acting experience. Brooks was forced to look elsewhere for his lead. Among other possibilities, he considered James Earl Jones, but Jones did not work out. Finally, Brooks auditioned Cleavon Little, a handsome stage/film/TV actor who brought a sly, disarming tone to his screen test. Little was hired for the picture. With that accomplished, Mel sent the *Black Bart* script to veteran actor Dan Dailey, hoping he would play the alcoholic Waco Kid. The former hoofer was not certain if he was right for a Western. He hedged about accepting a key role in this antiestablishment picture, and eventually said no. In this same period, Brooks pursued TV talk show host/comedian Johnny Carson, hoping to convince the conservative Carson to take the assignment. However, Johnny had little faith in his own acting abilities or that this wild screen project would be successful at the box office, and thus refused Mel's offer. With time running out to cast the crucial part, Brooks contacted Academy Award winner Gig Young. The latter, who had a well-known drinking problem, was in need of work and agreed to play the role of the lawman's scruffy pal.

When Mel tested actresses for the offbeat role of Lili Von Shtupp (a burlesque of Marlene Dietrich's screen persona in *Destry Rides Again*), he was thrilled when Madeline Kahn came to his attention. She was a striking new stage and film personality who possessed an operatic voice and a fetching figure, and had a unique way with comedic scenes. Madeline had already made a stir in Hollywood with her scene-stealing performance in the Barbra Streisand comedy *What's Up, Doc?* and there was good industry buzz about her performance in Peter Bogdanovich's upcoming release, *Paper Moon*. Kahn recalled of her audition with Brooks,

“It lasted hours. I felt like I was at the Mayo Clinic. For a funny man, he’s very serious.”

Ex-professional football player Alex Karras was contracted to make his screen debut as Mongo, a powerfully built dunce, while comedic performer Harvey Korman (famous for his ensemble work on Carol Burnett’s TV comedy/variety series) was assigned the role of the pompous, corrupt politician Hedley Lamarr. The buoyant Dom DeLuise was cast as the effete film director Buddy Bizarre. (Within the wacky plot, Bizarre is helming a musical on the studio lot where the surreal Western is unfolding.) For genre authenticity, veteran cowboy performer Slim Pickens was added to the cast as Lamarr’s bigoted stooge. Because Brooks had so enjoyed emoting in *The Twelve Chairs*, he gave himself two contrasting roles in his mock Western: a Yiddish-speaking Indian chief and the greedy, buffoonish, lewd governor William J. LePetomane. (Mel also made a quickie appearance in the picture as an extra in a lineup of bad men, and Anne Bancroft agreed to be an uncredited extra in a church sequence.)

Filming on the movie—whose title soon was changed to *Blazing Saddles*—got under way in January 1973. One of the first scenes to be shot took place at a jailhouse, where the imprisoned Waco Kid is spotted in an upside-down position. While shooting this footage, Mel noticed that the colead, Gig Young, seemed especially into his performance as the drunk. In fact, Young was even foaming at the mouth. Initially, Brooks thought this was merely Method acting on Young’s part. But soon it became clear that the actor was going through a severe withdrawal attack. He began to convulse, and then passed out. Gig had to be removed from the set by ambulance. Suddenly, at the start of his “comeback” project, Mel was without an essential lead.

Reeling from the disaster at hand, Brooks scrambled to locate a phone on the soundstage and placed an urgent call to Gene Wilder back in New York City. A panicked Mel explained the horrendous situation. Within hours, the producers of Wilder’s upcoming screen project, *The Little Prince*, had agreed to delay that film’s shooting schedule so Gene could immediately substitute on *Blazing Saddles*. By the next morning, Gene was on the *Blazing Saddles* set, ready to work.

Over a 10-week period, *Blazing Saddles* was shot at the studio, on various Tinseltown locations, and at a park in Agua Dulce, California, about 35 miles northeast of the Burbank movie lot. On this go-for-broke shoot, Brooks proved to be far more relaxed than he had been during his

past two ventures. He was surrounded not only by his writing team, but by familiar faces from past Brooks films: producer Michael Hertzberg, choreographer Alan Johnson, and composer/conductor John Morris. (The latter also orchestrated Mel's songs for this film, including the satiric title number sung over the opening credits by Frankie Laine and Lili Von Shtupp's showstopping saloon piece, "I'm Tired.")

Again, Brooks was heavily involved in supervising the film's editing process. (During this several-month stretch of polishing his project, Mel and Carl Reiner recorded their fourth 2000 Year Old Man album, *Carl Reiner & Mel Brooks: 2000 and Thirteen*, on the studio lot.) Meanwhile, there was a minor flap with the Screenwriters Guild regarding *Blazing Saddles*. Somehow, Richard Pryor's name had been left off the film's official writing credits. Pryor was ready to let it go, but the guild insisted Pryor's name be added to the picture's credits.

Finally, it came time to screen the film for a few key Warner Bros. executives. The picture began unspooling, and none of Mel's outrageousness seemed to get a rise out of the studio decision makers. The extremely mild response from the conservative executives stunned Brooks. He was all set to cancel a large screening scheduled for that evening, but Hertzberg urged him to go through with the showing, and, in fact, to invite a lot more of the studio's secretaries and blue-collar workers to the event.

Brooks described what went on at this key screening: "So 8 P.M. comes and two hundred and forty people are jammed into this room. Some of them have already heard the film is a stinker, because of the afternoon disaster. So they're very quiet and polite. Frankie Laine sings the title song, with the whip cracks. Laughs begin—good laughs. We go to the railroad section. The cruel overseer says to the black workers, 'Let's have a good old nigger work song.' Everybody gets a little chilled. Then the black guys start to sing 'I get no kick from champagne.' And that audience was like a Chagall painting. People left their chairs and floated upside down, and the laughter never stopped. It was big from that moment to the last frame of the last reel."

When word of the tremendous audience response to *Blazing Saddles* reached the studio bigwigs, they swiftly reversed their plan to throw this irreverent comedy to the wind. They ordered further test screenings and previews, and each time the audience reaction was highly positive. According to Mel, "After those screenings of *Blazing Saddles*, I was cor-

nered by the head of Warners. ‘Mel,’ he said, ‘it’s fine. OK they love it. But we can’t have the farting scene.’ So I made a little note and I said ‘Fine. It’s out.’ And he says we can’t have derogatory references to blacks. ‘OK,’ I say. ‘That’s out too.’ Then he says, ‘The animal rights people will come down on us if we have the horse being punched.’ ‘OK, OK,’ I say, ‘it’s out, out, out.’ The minute he left I tore up the notebook and never cut a thing. It’s what I always tell young film-makers. Say yes, yes, yes to every damn fool thing the producers ask, then ignore it all. No one ever notices.”

In so blithely defying the studio boss, Brooks also relied on the fact—which the executive had overlooked—that on all of Mel’s movies he had demanded and received control of the picture’s final cut. Most of all, Brooks had been determined from the start not to excise one bit of the movie’s controversial farting scene. For him it represented everything his unconventional movie was about. “In every cowboy picture, the cowboys sit around the campfire and eat 140,000 beans, and you never hear a burp, let alone a blooper. For 75 years these big, hairy brutes have been smashing their fists into each other’s faces and blasting each other full of holes with six-guns, but in all that time, not one has had the courage to produce a fart. I think that’s funny.” For the irrepressible (and sometimes raunchy) Mel Brooks, keeping in the farting scene—which set a new standard in Hollywood for how vulgar a Hollywood mainstream comedy could be—was a do-or-die point of honor.

Brooks explained how he actually filmed this pivotal campfire sequence: “They didn’t make a sound. I said, ‘Lift, turn, cross your legs. Do the normal gestures you would do to let a fart escape.’ Then afterwards, the sound editors got their friends together and they put soap under their armpits. Wet soap. And they slapped at it and made air pockets, and they did the noises that way. I came in to do some with my voice—a few high ones that they couldn’t do from under their arms. Y’know, bvrrrrrvt. But nobody put an actual fart on the soundtrack.” Mel observed of this gross scene, “It’s a funny thing about audiences. Every single human being I know abhorred that scene, myself included. But collectively we loved it. What could be lower low comedy than a bunch of cowboys breaking wind around the campfire? But it worked. People were ready for it. It was a broad, brave truth that had always been on the back of everyone’s tongue when they were watching straight Westerns.”

With its R rating, the 93-minute *Blazing Saddles* had a special promotional preview at Los Angeles's Pickwick Drive-in Theater on February 6, 1974. The guests of honor included 100 horses and their friends. Robyn Helton (who played Miss Stein in the movie) was the hostess of the unique event. The next day *Blazing Saddles* went into release, promoted with the advertising slogan "Never give a saga an even break."

Vincent Canby (of the *New York Times*) allowed that the Western spoof was "Funny in the way . . . a rude burp in church can be." The *Wall Street Journal* labeled the proceedings "an undisciplined mess." On the other hand, Roger Ebert (of the *Chicago Sun-Times*) reported, "There are some people who can literally get away with anything—say anything, do anything—and people will let them. Other people attempt a mildly dirty joke and bring total silence down on a party. Mel Brooks is not only a member of the first group, he is its lifetime president. At its best, his comedy operates in areas so far removed from taste that (to coin his own expression) it rises below vulgarity. . . . *Blazing Saddles* is like that. It's a crazed grab bag of a movie that does everything to keep us laughing except hit us over the head with a rubber chicken. Mostly, it succeeds. It's an audience picture; it doesn't have a lot of classy polish and its structure is a total mess. But of course! What does that matter while Alex Karras is knocking a horse cold with a right cross to the jaw?"

In actuality, Ebert was exactly on target with his response to *Blazing Saddles*. Most moviegoers of the time were entranced by this madly unorthodox feature with its array of crude jokes, meandering plotline, and caustic comments on a wide range of topics (racial discrimination, homosexuality, the old West, and political hypocrisy). Following in the tradition of his favorite screen comedians—the Ritz Brothers and the Marx Brothers—Mel ensured that the antic *Blazing Saddles* was chock-full of slapstick, puns, non sequiturs, and, most of all, outrageous verbal and visual set pieces.

In its initial 1974 theatrical release, the atypical picture (which cost about \$2.6 million to make) earned domestic film rentals of some \$25 million, and tallied approximately \$15 million more in reissue in the next few years. (This did not take into account pay and broadcast TV rights, foreign distribution, or home entertainment editions of the runaway hit.) Within short order, *Blazing Saddles* became the second-highest-earning

Hollywood screen comedy of all time, outdistanced to that date only by 1970's *M*A*S*H*.

With this megahit, the nonconformist Mel Brooks, at long last, had crashed the gates of the Hollywood establishment, and he intended to stay there.

