

Directed by Mike Nichols
Based on the play by Edward Albee
Screenplay by Ernest Lehman
Produced by Ernest Lehman
Original Music by Alex North
Cinematography by Haskell Wexler
Film Editing by Sam O'Steen

Elizabeth Taylor...Martha
 Richard Burton...George
 George Segal...Nick
 Sandy Dennis...Honey
 Agnes Flanagan...Roadhouse Waitress
 Frank Flanagan...Roadhouse Manager

Awards

Writers Guild of America – Best Written American Drama
 Five Academy Awards from its thirteen nominations: Best Actress (Elizabeth Taylor), Best Supporting Actress (Sandy Dennis), Best B/W Cinematography (Haskell Wexler), Best Art Direction and Best Costume Design. Nominations for Best Picture, Best Actor (Richard Burton), Best Supporting Actor (George Segal), Best Director (Mike Nichols), Best Screenplay (Ernest Lehman), Best Sound, Best Original Music Score, and Best Film Editing. It was the first film ever to be nominated in every eligible category, and the first film to have every member of its cast receive an acting nomination.

MIKE NICHOLS (6 November 1931, Berlin, Germany) has directed 22 films: *Charlie Wilson's War* 2007, *Closer* 2004/I, "Angels in America" 2003, "Wit" 2001, *What Planet Are You From?* 2000, *Primary Colors / Perfect Couple* 1998, *The Birdcage* 1996, *Wolf* 1994, *Regarding Henry* 1991, *Postcards from the Edge* 1990, *Working Girl* 1988, *Biloxi Blues* 1988, *Heartburn* 1986, *Silkwood* 1983, *Gilda Live* 1980, *The Fortune* 1975, *The Day of the Dolphin* 1973, *Carnal Knowledge* 1971, *Catch-22* 1970, *Teach Me!* 1968, and *The Graduate* 1967, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966

EDWARD ALBEE (12 March 1928, Washington, D.C.) has won playwriting Pulitzer Prizes for *Three Tall Women* 1994, *Seascape* 1975, and *A Delicate Balance* 1966. He has also won an Obie

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(1960) and a Tony (1964). Some of his other plays are *The Zoo Story* 1959, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1962, and *The Death of Bessie Smith* 1959.

ERNEST LEHMAN (8 December 1915, New York City—2 July 2005, Los Angeles, California) wrote 22 films, among them *Black Sunday* 1977, *Family Plot* 1976, *Portnoy's Complaint* 1972, *Hello, Dolly!* 1969, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966, *The Sound of Music* 1965, *The Prize* 1963, *West Side Story* 1961, *From the Terrace* 1960, *North by Northwest* 1959, *Sweet Smell of Success* 1957, *Somebody Up There Likes Me* 1956, *The King and I* 1956, *Lux Video Theatre* 1955 TV, *The Ford Television Theatre* 1954 TV, *Sabrina* 1954, *Executive Suite* 1954, and *The Inside Story* 1948. He also produced 3 films *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Hello, Dolly!*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and directed one: *Portnoy's Complaint*.

ALEX NORTH (4 December 1910, Chester, Pennsylvania—8 September 1991, Los Angeles, California) composed scores for 75 films and shows, among them *The Penitent* 1988, *John Huston* and

the Dubliners 1988, *Good Morning, Vietnam* 1987, *The Dead* 1987, "Death of a Salesman" 1985, *Prizzi's Honor* 1985, *Under the Volcano* 1984, "Sister, Sister" 1982, *Dragonslayer* 1981, *Carny* 1980, *Wise Blood* 1979, *Somebody Killed Her Husband / Charade '79* 1978, *The Passover Plot* 1976, "Rich Man, Poor Man" 1976, *Journey Into Fear* 1975, *Willard* 1971, *The Shoes of the Fisherman* 1968/I, *The Devil's Brigade* 1968, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966, *The Agony and the Ecstasy* 1965, *The Outrage* 1964, *Cheyenne Autumn* 1964, *Cleopatra* 1963, *All Fall Down* 1962, *The Children's Hour* 1961, *Sanctuary* 1961, *The Misfits* 1961, *Spartacus* 1960, *The Sound and the Fury* 1959, *The Long, Hot Summer* 1958, *The Bachelor Party* 1957, *The King and Four Queens* 1956, *The Rainmaker* 1956, *The Bad Seed* 1956, *I'll Cry Tomorrow* 1955, *The Rose Tattoo* 1955, *Desirée* 1954, *The Member of the Wedding* 1952, *Les misérables* 1952, *Viva Zapata!* 1952, *Death of a Salesman* 1951, *A Streetcar Named Desire* 1951, *Heart of Spain* 1937, and *The People of the Cumberland* 1937.

HASKELL WEXLER (6 February 1926, Chicago, Illinois) won best cinematographer Oscars for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966 and *Bound for Glory* 1976. He is credited as cinematographer on 64 other films and shows, among them *Something's Gonna Live* 2010, *In the*



Name of Democracy: America's Conscience, a Soldier's Sacrifice 2009, *Bridge to Havana* 2004, *The Man on Lincoln's Nose* 2000, *Good Kurds, Bad Kurds: No Friends But the Mountains* 2000, *Mexico* 2000, *Limbo* 1999, "Sandra Bernhard: I'm Still Here... Damn It!" 1999, *The Rich Man's Wife* 1996, *Mulholland Falls* 1996, *Canadian Bacon* 1995, *The Sixth Sun: Mayan Uprising in Chiapas* 1995, *The Secret of Roan Inish* 1994, *The Babe* 1992, *Other People's Money* 1991, *Blaze* 1989, *Colors* 1988, *Matewan* 1987, *The Man Who Loved Women* 1983, *Lookin' to Get Out* 1982, *Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip* 1982, *No Nukes* 1980, *Coming Home* 1978, *Paul Jacobs and the Nuclear Gang* 1978, *Underground* 1976, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* 1975, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* 1972, *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* 1971, *Medium Cool* 1969, *Faces* 1968, *The Thomas Crown Affair* 1968, *In the Heat of the Night* 1967, *The Loved One* 1965, *The Bus* 1965, *The Best Man* 1964, *Lonnie* 1963, *America, America* 1963, *Face in the Rain* 1963, *Angel Baby* 1961, *Hoodlum Priest* 1961, *The Fisherman and His Soul* 1961, *The Runaway* 1961, *Studs Lonigan* 1960, *Five Bold Women* 1960, *The Savage Eye* 1960, *Stakeout on Dope Street* 1958, and *The Living City* 1953. He also directed 12 films, most of them documentaries: *From Wharf Rats to Lords of the Docks* 2007, *Who Needs Sleep?* 2006, *Bus Rider's Union* 2000, *Latino* 1985, *Bus II* 1983, *War Without Winners* 1978, *Underground* 1976, *Introduction to the Enemy* 1974, *Brazil: A Report on Torture* 1971, *Medium Cool* 1969, *The Bus* 1965, and *The Living City* 1953.

ELIZABETH TAYLOR (27 February 1932, Hampstead, London, England) appeared in 70 films and TV shows and series, among them "These Old Broads" 2001, *The Flintstones* 1994, "The Simpsons" 1992, "North and South" 1985, "All My Children" 1970,

"General Hospital" 1981, *The Mirror Crack'd* 1980, *Winter Kills* 1979, *A Little Night Music* 1977, "Victory at Entebbe" 1976, *The Blue Bird* 1976, *Ash Wednesday* 1973, *Night Watch* 1973, *Under Milk Wood* 1972, *X, Y and Zee* 1972, *Anne of the Thousand Days* 1969, *Secret Ceremony* 1968, *Boom!* 1968, *The Comedians* 1967, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* 1967, *Doctor Faustus* 1967, *The Taming of the Shrew* 1967, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966, *The Sandpiper* 1965, *The V.I.P.s* 1963, *Cleopatra* 1963, *Butterfield 8* 1960, *Suddenly, Last Summer* 1959, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 1958, *Raintree County* 1957, *Giant* 1956, *The Last Time I Saw Paris* 1954, *Beau Brummell* 1954, *Elephant Walk* 1954, *Rhapsody* 1954, *The Girl Who Had Everything* 1953, *Ivanhoe* 1952, *Quo Vadis* 1951, *A Place in the Sun* 1951, *Father of the Bride* 1950, *Little Women* 1949, *A Date with Judy* 1948, *Life with Father* 1947, *Courage of Lassie* 1946, *National Velvet* 1944, *Jane Eyre* 1943, and *Lassie Come Home* 1943.

RICHARD BURTON (10 November 1925, Pontrhydyfen, Wales, UK—5 August 1984, Céligny, Geneva, Switzerland) was in 69 films and TV programs, some of which are "Ellis Island" 1984, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 1984, "Wagner" 1983, *Circle of Two* 1980, *The Wild Geese* 1978, *The Medusa Touch* 1978, *Equus* 1977, *Exorcist II: The Heretic* 1977, *The Klansman* 1974, *Massacre in Rome / Rappresaglia* 1973, *Bluebeard* 1972, *The Assassination of Trotsky* 1972, *Under Milk Wood* 1972, *Anne of the Thousand Days* 1969, *Candy* 1968, *Where Eagles Dare* 1968, *Boom!* 1968, *The Comedians* 1967, *Doctor Faustus* 1967, *The Taming of the Shrew* 1967, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* 1965, *The Sandpiper* 1965, *What's New Pussycat* 1965, *Hamlet* 1964, *The Night of the Iguana* 1964, *Becket* 1964, *Zulu* 1964, *The V.I.P.s* 1963, *Cleopatra* 1963, *The Longest Day* 1962, *Ice Palace* 1960, *Look Back in Anger* 1959, "The James Mason Show" 1956, "Performer" 1956, *Alexander the Great* 1956, *The Rains of Ranchipur* 1955, *Prince of Players* 1955, *The Robe* 1953, *The Desert Rats* 1953, *My Cousin Rachel* 1952, *Waterfront Women* 1950, and *Women of Dolwyn* 1949.

GEORGE SEGAL (13 February 1934, Great Neck, Long Island, New York) has 116 acting credits, among them *Love and Other Drugs* 2010, *Ollie Klubershturf vs the Nazis* 2010, "Entourage" 2009, *Heights* 2005, "The Linda McCartney Story" 2000, "Tracey Takes On..." 1997, "The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest" 1996-1997, *The Mirror Has Two Faces* 1996, *The Cable Guy* 1996, "Murder, She Wrote" 1993, *Look Who's Talking Now* 1993, *Look Who's Talking* 1989, "Murphy's Law" 1988-1989, *The Last Married Couple in America* 1980, *Who Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe?* 1978, *Fun with Dick and Jane* 1977, *The Duchess and the Dirtwater Fox* 1976, *The Black Bird* 1975, *California Split* 1974, *The Terminal Man* 1974, *A Touch of Class* 1973, *Blume in Love* 1973, *The Hot Rock* 1972, *The Owl and the Pussycat* 1970, *The Bridge at Remagen* 1969, *No Way to Treat a Lady* 1968, *Bye Bye Braverman* 1968, "Of Mice and Men" 1968, *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* 1967, "The Desperate Hours" 1967, *The Quiller Memorandum* 1966, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966, *Lost Command* 1966, "Death of a Salesman" 1966, *King Rat* 1965, *Ship of Fools* 1965, "The Alfred Hitchcock Hour" 1963, and *The Longest Day* 1962.

SANDY DENNIS (27 April 1937, Hastings, Nebraska—2 March 1992, Westport, Connecticut) appeared in 35 films and shows, among them *The Indian Runner* 1991, *Another Woman* 1988, "The Love Boat" 1985, *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean,*

Jimmy Dean 1982, "Police Story" 1978, *The Out of Towners* 1970, *That Cold Day in the Park* 1969, "A Hatful of Rain" 1968, *The Fox* 1967, *Up the Down Staircase* 1967, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1966, *The Three Sisters* 1966, "Naked City" 1962-1963, *Splendor in the Grass* 1961, and "Guiding Light" 1952.

MIKE NICHOLS, from *World Film Directors v.2. Ed. John Wakeman, H.W. Wilson Co., NY 1988.*

American director and producer, was born Michael Igor Peschkowsky in Berlin, Germany. He is the son of Paul Peschkowsky, a Russian Jewish doctor who had emigrated to Germany after the revolution and the former Brigitte Landauer. His maternal grandparents were Hedwig Lachmann, who wrote the German libretto for Richard Strauss' *Salome*, and Gustav Lahemann, head of the German Social Democrat Party, who was eventually murdered by the Nazis.

Nichols can himself remember being racially segregated and harassed as a small boy in Germany. In 1938 his father went alone to the United States, where he changed his name to Paul Nichols, obtained American medical qualifications and set up a practice in Manhattan. The following year Mike Nichols and his older brother joined him. Their mother, detained by illness, followed in 1941.

Paul Nichols was successful in his adopted country. The family lived near Central Park in Manhattan, and Mike Nichols was sent to the Cherry Lane School in Darien, Connecticut, the Dalton School and Walden High in New York—a series of "very chic, very progressive schools" where he was generally lonely and unhappy. Nichols was stagestruck by the time he was fourteen but was assured by his teachers that he was not suited for a theatrical career.

Graduating from Walden, Nichols enrolled in New York University but soon dropped out. Drudging as a shipping clerk was no more satisfying, and in 1950, when he was nineteen, he began the pre-med program at the University of Chicago, planning a career in psychiatry. At about the same time he was married to a girl even younger than himself.

Formerly lethargic, and given to sleeping away the greater part of his time, Nichols now began to tap his immense resources of energy. His father had died some years earlier, leaving the family financially hard-pressed. Nichols had to work his way through college in an assortment of jobs, including one as a radio announcer. Finding that he could cut classes and still keep pace with the other students, he also began to involve himself in university theatrical activities. According to his own account, he first became aware of a fellow student named Elaine May when she sneered at his performance in Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. He made his debut as a director in another university production, of Yeats' *Purgatory*.

Nichols abandoned his psychiatric career in 1954, when he went to New York and joined Lee Strasberg's Actor's Studio. He supported himself by teaching horseback riding and waiting tables

at Howard Johnson's. The story goes that he lost the latter job when a customer asked which of the establishment's great range of ice creams he would recommend for a hot fudge sundae and Nichols suggested chicken. After that he worked as a disc jockey in Philadelphia, commuting to New York for his lessons at the Actor's Studio.

In 1955 Nichols was invited to join Shepherd's Compass Theatre in Chicago, a sort of threadbare nightclub where the performers improvised their satirical sketches, often around ideas elicited from the audience. The Compass Players, an extraordinarily talented bunch of unknowns, included Alan Arkin, Shelley Berman, Barbara Harris, Zorah Lampert, and Nichols' old university sparring partner Elaine May. It was then that Nichols developed his reputation as "the fastest tongue in the Midwest."

According to an article in *Time* magazine (June 15, 1970), Elaine May replaced Nichols' "child bride," although their relationship was "much too serious for marriage." Or much too funny. Thanks to what *Time* calls "their matched metabolism and high literacy," as well as their "impeccable" stagecraft, they worked marvelously together. When Compass folded in the fall of 1957, the routines they had developed there formed the basis of a double act

that, after a couple of years of growing acclaim in nightclubs and on television, arrived on Broadway in October 1960 as *An Evening With Mike Nichols and Elaine May*. The two-character sketches that made up the program were like frontline reports from the sex war, mixed in with parodic variations on the works of Pirandello, Proust, O'Neill, and Noel Coward. The best of them are preserved on five enormously successful discs.

Elaine May wanted to write and Nichols to direct. After *An Evening With* finally closed in July

1961, they went their separate ways (though Nichols subsequently starred in May's unsuccessful play *A Matter of Position*). Nichols went first to Vancouver, where he directed a production of *The Importance of Being Ernest* (and played in Shaw's *Saint Joan*). He had his first smash hit in 1963 with Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park*, which brought him a Tony award as best director of the year. The following year Nichols staged an off-Broadway production of Ann Jellicoe's *The Knack* and had another Tony-winning triumph with Murray Schisgal's *Luv*. There was another Neil Simon hit, *The Odd Couple*, in 1965, and yet another Tony.

Nichols was already a celebrity as a sophisticated entertainer. By 1966, an unbroken succession of Broadway smashes had made him "the most in-demand director in the American theatre"—a "superstar" and "a certified Beautiful Person." He was, *Time* prattled on, the "intimate of Lenny and Jackie, chum of Gloria Steinem.... His Upper West Side triplex was decorated by Billy Baldwin. His Rolls patiently waited at the curb while he visited his fellow greats."

At that point, with no experience whatever of the cinema, he was invited by Warner Brothers to direct the screen version of Edward Albee's most famous play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. Those *monstres sacrés* play George and Martha—an associate professor of history at a minor college, witty, intelligent, but psychologically



deeply scarred; and his vulgar and venomous wife, daughter of the college president. The setting is their house on campus, where, after a faculty party, they repair to drink away the night, and to rend each other emotionally with a skill and knowledge born of much practice. Hapless witness of these scenes of witty torment are two newcomers to the college—Nick (George Segal), a ruthlessly ambitious and macho young biologist, and his frigid wife Honey (Sandy Dennis).

A fifth character, much discussed, is George and Martha's son who, we learn, is shortly to arrive home. He is never seen and indeed, it emerges, he has never existed. This does not prevent George, at the film's climax, from "killing" him—a brave and loving attempt to exorcise a fantasy that allows their agonized symbiosis no way forward.

As Stanley Kauffmann pointed out, Mike Nichols had been given "two world-shaking stars, the play of the decade and the auspices of a large looming studio. What more inhibiting conditions could be imagined for a first film? . . . But Mr. Nichols has at least survived." Ernest Lehman, the picture's producer and scriptwriter, had "broken the play out of its one living-room set into various rooms in the house and onto the lawn, which the play accepts well enough. He has also placed one scene in a roadhouse which is a patently forced move for visual variety. . . . The real job of 'filmizing' was left to the director" who "with no possible chance to cut loose cinematically. . . has made the most of the two elements that were left to him—intimacy and acting."

Kauffmann thought that Nichols had "gone to school to several film masters. . . in the skills of keeping the camera close, indecently prying; giving us a sense of the characters' very breath; tracking a face—in the rhythm of a scene—as the actor moves, to take us to other faces; puncturing with sudden withdrawals to give us a brief, almost dispassionate respite; then plunging us in close again to one or two faces, for lots of pores and bile. There is not much that is original in Mr. Nichols' camerawork, no sense of the personality that we get in his stage direction. . . . But he has minimized the 'stage' feeling, and he has given the film an insidious presence, good phrasing and a nervous drive."

This was fairly typical of the film's reviews, though some critics took extreme positions, for or against. One thought that it established Nichols as "the new Orson Welles." Others assumed that what was most successful in the film could be attributed to the director's collaborators—to the producer Ernest Lehman, the photographer Haskell Wexler, the composer Alex North, and/or to two men who thereafter regularly worked on Nichols's films, the production designer Richard Sylbert and the editor Sam O'Steen.

Virtually everyone agreed that Nichols had drawn marvelous performances from his actors. All of them were nominated for Oscars, as was almost everyone involved in the movie, including the director. Academy Awards actually went to Elizabeth Taylor, Sandy Dennis, Haskell Wexler, Richard Sylbert, and the costume designer Irene Sharaff. Threatened with censorship on account of the profanity of its language, *Who's Afraid* was specifically exempted from Production Code standards in recognition of its serious intentions as a work of art. And the paying

public likewise took the film to its multifarious bosom. Made at a cost of about \$6 million, the movie grossed \$14.5 million, suggesting that Nichols' Midas touch knew no formal barriers.

Pausing only to snap up his fourth Tony award as director of yet another Neil Simon smash, *Plaza Suite*, Nichols made his second film, *The Graduate* (1967). Scripted by Buck Henry and Calder Willingham from the novel by Charles Webb, it became a cult object and a manifesto for a whole generation of young people, earned Nichols an Oscar as best director of the year, and grossed \$50 million, making it one of the greatest box-office successes in the history of the cinema. Its Simon and Garfunkel songs—"The Sound of Silence," "Mrs. Robinson," "Scarborough Fair"—were as much loved as the film itself.

The Graduate brought instant stardom to little-known Dustin Hoffman. He plays Benjamin Braddock who, having fulfilled all his parents' expectations at college, graduates *summa cum laude* and goes home to Los Angeles. He has no idea of what to do with the rest of his life—only the wrap-around affluence and a career in plastics are not the answer. Benjamin sinks into anomie, where he is promptly seduced by Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft), predatory wife of his father's business partner, who gobbles up what remains of Benjamin's wilted ego.

What saves him is his dawning love for Mrs. Robinson's daughter Elaine (Katherine Ross). Their situation is impossible and (as Nichols says) "impossibility always leads to passion." Forbidden access to Elaine, first by his mistress, then by Elaine herself, he learns that she is to marry a more acceptable graduate. A bemused Lochinvar, he rushes to the church, arrives too late to halt the ceremony, but snatches her away from her outraged clan. With Elaine still in her wedding dress, they escape by bus into an uncertain future in a scene that brought many audiences cheering to their feet.

H. Wayne Schuth, in his monograph on Mike Nichols, analyzes *The Graduate* in terms of its symbolic use of color, music, and visual images. Schuth maintains that water and "drowning" are motifs that recur throughout Nichols' work, and are especially prominent in this film. Thus we see Benjamin's face in close-up "swimming" through the alien faces at his welcome-home party, then the fish swimming behind their glass walls in his aquarium (which contains a model of a deep-sea diver). Later, wearing the diving gear his father has given him, Benjamin enters the family pool, wanders to the deep end and stands there alone, the camera pulling back and back so that he becomes smaller and smaller as the blue water obscures him. Benjamin is shown symbolically drowning, fading away, becoming nothing."

...*The Graduate* was one of the most thoroughly discussed of recent American movies, recognized at once as a cultural event, a document in the youth revolution. Not everyone agreed that it was an important event or a valuable document, but Andrew Sarris found it "moving precisely because its hero passes from a premature maturity to an innocence regained, and idealism reconfirmed." John Lindsay Brown, in an article about Nichols in *Sight and Sound* (Spring 1972), drew a somewhat different conclusion, calling "the enchanted fairytale conclusion...moving precisely because of its ambiguity within Benjamin. As the bus



moves off with both him and Elaine smiling defiantly at the audience, no real transition from innocence to experience has yet been made.”

Some critics failed to find the film moving in any terms, though most thought it wonderfully funny, thanks to “a dazzlingly witty script that rewards great attention.” Paul Mayersburg, whose phrase that is, also complained of “density in the visuals.” David Robinson found it “basically a rather messy and indecisive film, very uncertain in intention and tone and unashamedly derivative” (of Karel Reisz’s *Morgan* among other films). And the iconoclastic David Thomson called the movie “a horrible mesh of whimsy, safe black humor and continental games with time.”

Critical opinion was just as radically divided about Nichols’ next picture, *Catch-22* (1970), scripted by Buck Henry from the book by Joseph Heller and photographed on location (mostly in Mexico) by David Watkin. The setting is an American bomber base in Italy in 1944. Allied victory is inevitable, but the publicity-crazed Colonel Cathcart (Martin Balsam) endlessly escalates the number of missions his men must fly. And when bombardier Captain Yossarian (Alan Arkin) tries to opt out of the mindless slaughter, pleading insanity, he encounters Catch-22: “Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn’t really crazy,” so he has to go on flying.

This kind of Lewis Carroll logic permeates the film, reflecting the global insanity of war itself. Lieutenant Milo Minderbinder (Jon Voight) for example, finding it profitable to sell army rations, is soon disposing of his comrades’ parachutes, and in due course negotiating the bombing of his own base with the Germans. At every turn, corruption is honored, goodness and humanity are crucified—Yossarian, who happens to be naked at the time, does receive a medal from General Dreedle (Orson Welles) but only to encourage him to bomb a civilian target.

Five times in the course of the film, Yossarian’s mind returns to the nightmare scene in which, during a raid, he had tried to help his wounded gunner Snowden; each time his mind flinches away from the memory before it reaches the discovery of Snowden’s appalling wound. “As in a psychoanalysis,” Nichols says, “Yossarian keeps getting closer to the memory and then forgetting it and cutting it off. That’s what the movie is.... When he finally does remember Snowden, he breaks down and is reconstituted and makes his decision. It is exactly a parallel to psychoanalysis.” Yossarian’s decision is to desert. The film ends with him in a life-raft, paddling toward Sweden.

Catch-22 is in fact a series of dream sequences. As Buck Henry has said, “everything except the last scene where Yossarian leaves the hospital and goes to Sweden is inside Yossarian’s mind.” This was not true of the novel and was not apparent to some critics who were accordingly confused. Others missed the endless comic invention of the book.... It garnered no Oscars or nominations and, though it grossed over \$12 million, it is not certain that this actually

represented a profit, the cost of the film having been cited variously as \$10 million and \$14 million.

In *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), Nichols returned to the intimate scale of his first two films. The original and extremely witty script was by the cartoonist and dramatist Jules Feiffer, who shared Nichols’ preoccupation with American sexual neuroses. It follows the sexual careers of two friends—the stud Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) and the romantic Sandy (Art Garfunkel)—from college days at Amherst in the mid-1940s to the early 1970s. The principal women in their lives are Susan (Candice Bergen), whom they meet at college and who is secretly seduced by Jonathan, though she eventually marries Sandy; Bobbie (Ann-Margret), who moves in with Jonathan, marries him, and eventually divorces him; and Cindy (Cynthia O’Neal), Sandy’s second wife, whom Jonathan tries but fails to seduce. In the end, as David Robinson wrote, “a middle-aged Sandy is discovering mystical love with a hippy girl half his age, while Jonathan is paying prostitutes to arouse his failing appetites with pathological rituals of his own devising.”

Some reviewers decided that the problem with Jonathan and Sandy was latent homosexuality, but Jules Feiffer attributed their condition to “the society...[they] were born into. the mythology they were reared in from birth.... They were trained to think about women as conveniences, receptacles, appendages....[sex] had to do with rivalry and envy, with competition with other fellow, more than it had to do with women.”...Jonathan Rabin called *Carnal Knowledge* “a glossy, undistinguished film, full of slack and dreadfully static.” Most critics thought better of it than that, and for many it is Nichols’ best film....

After *Carnal Knowledge*, which grossed \$12.3 million, Nichols returned for a time to the theatre. He directed Neil Simon’s latest play, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, adding another Tony to his collection, and the following year, 1973, staged a production of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*, in a new translation by himself and Albert Todd. Its star, George C. Scott, played the lead in Nichols’ next film, *The Day of the Dolphin* (1973).

Nichols’ central theme, in the opinion of John Lindsay Brown, is “the varieties of defeat suffered by innocence in its confrontations with experience.” Such a confrontation is certainly central in *The*

Day of the Dolphin, another Buck Henry script from the novel by Robert Merle. Scott plays Dr. Jake Terrell, a marine biologist who, on his Prospero’s island off the Florida coast, is teaching dolphins to think and speak like human beings. Malevolent forces plan to pervert the animals’ innocent intelligence by involving them in a plot to murder the American president. Terrell, who loves the dolphins, frees them into the ocean, instructing them never to speak again. At the end, he is calmly awaiting murder at the hands of the villains.

Splendidly photographed by William A. Fraker, the film has a lyrical score by Georges Delerue, full of “Bach-like chorales” as the dolphins “race, leap, dance, dive, pirouette, talk, stand on their tails and all but walk off with the film.” It seemed to David



Robinson that “the training of the dolphins owes something of its feeling to Truffaut’s *L’Enfant Sauvage*, in its picture of the patience and the reluctant cruelty of the teacher, the terrible resistance and equally terrible capitulation of the pupil.” But this promising parable “dwindles to the banality of a Disney live-action animal adventure, distinctly out of style with the talents involved.”

By Nichols’ standards, *The Day of the Dolphin* was only moderately successful, and the decline continued—at least in financial terms—with *The Fortune* (1975), an original script by “Adrien Joyce” (Carole Eastman). It is set in the 1920s, mostly in and around a Spanish stucco bungalow in southern California. Here Freddie (Stockard Channing), a kooky teen-age heiress, is shackled up with two naive and incompetent con men (Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson). When they are not double-crossing one another or making out with Freddie, Nicky and Oscar are planning to murder her for her money. In the end, confronted with incontrovertible evidence of their lethal intentions, Freddie simply refuses to accept it and return cheerfully to her dangerous *ménage à trois* in a willed victory of innocence over experience.... Molly Haskell thought that “Nichols deserves credit for a concept that tries to combine imbecility and lust in a way that is often found in Italian, but rarely in American comic acting.”...

For the next eight years, Nichols directed no fictional films, devoting himself to television, as producer of the ABC-TV series *Family*, and to the theatre, where he directed *Streamers*, *Comedians*, *The Gin Game*, the musical *Annie*, and other successful productions. In 1980 he made a smoothly-paced documentary of the comedian Gilda Radner’s Broadway performance, basically a one-woman show with a little help from other veterans of NBC-TV’s popular *Saturday Night Live*. But his next major film was *Silkwood* (1983), based on the true story of Karen Silkwood, who died under suspicious circumstances in a car accident in 1974. A union activist, she allegedly had obtained documents—never recovered—that would have embarrassed her employer, the Kerr-McGee Corporation, which at that time manufactured nuclear fuel out of plutonium. Written by Nora Ephron and Alice Arlen, the film stars Meryl Streep as the angular pill-popping heroine and mines the contrast between the workers’ messy, idiosyncratic lives and the futuristic technology of their workplace.

Silkwood received a number of Oscar and Golden Globe nominations. Vincent Canby called it “a brassy, profane, gum-chewing *tour de force*, as funny as it is moving,” and said “it may be the most serious work Mike Nichols has yet done in films.” David Denby could not “help loving a tragic movie with so fertile a sense of the incongruous.” And for Jack Kroll it was one of the best films of the year.

Throughout the 1980s, Nichols was unusually busy in the New York Theatre.... Yet Nichols somehow found time to return to Hollywood to make another film, *Heartburn* (1986), adapted for the screen by Nora Ephron from her own novel based on her marriage to celebrity journalist Carl Bernstein.

This time out, reviews were generally negative. It was felt that Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson were both able enough in their roles, but that their performances added up to a series of bright, effective moments rather than a realized study of relationships. Stanley Kauffmann remarked that Nichols “is one of the best of directors, on stage or screen, as long as he sticks to lightweight stuff.... He has given the film a freshness of composition, a scene-by-scene substance, that implies comedy-drama of more import than we get.... This is just a series of events, not a drama, not even a narrative made cogent by insight.” Pauline Kael agreed, observing that Nichols’ technique—his moving the camera in for each significant nuance—makes us unduly conscious of the acting, and how studied it is. He turns us into connoisseurs of performance instead of giving us a grasp of character.” The complaint of many critics was summed up by Richard Corliss when he wrote that *Heartburn* “doesn’t seem to be about anything.... it’s less a slice of life than a slice of lifestyle.”...

Interviewers describe Nichols as a tall, slim, slow-moving man who manages to combine “an ethereal fragile air” with “an impression of intense alertness.” He breeds and sells Arabian horses. Nichols once said that his talent “isn’t necessarily the one I would have chosen, but people have no choice. They have to go on as themselves.”

from 1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die. Gen. Ed Steven Jay Schneiderman. “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” entry by R. Barton Palmer.

With its unremitting portrait of an older married couple who draw a young husband and wife into their destructive love/hate games, Edward Albee’s Broadway smash of the early 1960s was at first considered too brutal in terms of language and theme to be

brought to the screen because of Production Code restrictions. But by the middle of the decade, Hollywood was abandoning the code in favor of a ratings system that would permit the exhibition of more adult dramas, and Mike Nichols’ adaptation of Albee’s play was among the first to appear on screens (theater owners were asked not to admit anyone under 18, as the new ratings categories had not yet been finalized).

Nichols’ version of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is an important part of another trend—the move, in part, away from traditional entertainment toward a greater seriousness that would characterize the Hollywood Renaissance of the late 1960s and 1970s. Filmed in black-and-white and based on a fine screenplay by Ernest Lehman that keeps much of the play’s dialogue, Nichols, who came to Hollywood from stage directing, preserves the essence of Albee’s original. The casting was an extraordinary coup, with the



world's most tempestuous and passionate couple, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, cast as George and Martha, whose unremitting verbal and mental fencing constitutes the main action. George is a history professor at the local college and Martha the daughter of its president; they invite a younger faculty member (George Segal) and his wife (Sandy Dennis) for a late evening of mental games: First "Humiliate the Host," but then, more destructively, "Get the Guests." In this unequal contest, the young marrieds come off second best, with the less-than-honorable aspects of their marriage laid bare and the young man's confidence in himself severely shaken. Of the many attempts to use the Burtons effectively in a film, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is by far the most successful, as Nichols elicited the best performance of the actress's career and Burton is effective as a weak man possessed of enormous emotional strength and an inexhaustible capacity to love. The film richly deserved its five Academy Awards; it is certainly one of the finest adaptations of a stage play ever produced.



Editor Sam O'Steen interviewed by his wife Bobbie on *Virginia Woolf*:

*You said when you were cutting *Virginia Woolf*, it was like a bucket of worms, that it just went on and on.*

It had a very fast motor and you had to keep it going. Once you opened that up, you just had to go with it.

What was the biggest technical difficulty?

All the overlapping dialogue. Mike called me down to the set and said, "Two people are talking all the time and I want them to overlap, how do I do it?" I said, "Use two cameras, you know, camera on him, camera on her, you got one track" But one of them wouldn't do it, I think it was Burton, cause he said, "I can't act when you do that, why don't you shoot one, then the other?" I said, "Then I'd have to cut the track first." Mike said, "Do whatever you have to do." So this is what I did: When George and Martha were talking at the same time, I mixed their two tracks together. I did a dub on it, and it came out right, bang, the scene timed out about right, so then I coded the soundtrack [had numbers printed on the edge to match the picture's code numbers, so that they were both in sync]. I did it twice to match both actors, George's takes and Martha's takes. So say George is speaking Latin and Martha is wailing away, and they're talking between them – well, when I started cutting first to her, then to him, it didn't matter if they

overlapped, they would always be in sync. I could cut anyplace I wanted to.

You just invented that, basically.

I guess so.

You developed a saying around that time, to remind a director not to become too attached to a moment, or a scene.

"Movie first, scene second, moment third." That is the order of importance for everything.

So everything has to be justified in terms of how it serves the movie, you can't hold onto a scene – or moment – just because you like it.

Right.

Tell about the walk to the tree.

If you remember, after the big squabble Honey [Sandy Dennis] and Martha go running off to the bathroom and George takes a walk to the tree. It seems like a long time where nothing was happening, so I asked Mike why he did that and he said you have to have a break after all the fighting. You can't be afraid to be boring. Then we could start building up to the fighting again, and blast away.

That was a lesson.

Yeah, all movies are – should be – a series of arcs. You start it at one level, build to a climax, then you have to come down and start over again, there's nowhere else to go. If you stay at one level, it won't sustain. And Mike and I would refer to "the walk to the tree" on other pictures, when we needed to let it breathe, let it build up again.

Where did you shoot the walk to the tree and all the other exteriors?

At Smith College in Northhampton, Massachusetts. When we arrived it was September, which is still summer in California. Well, it sure wasn't in Massachusetts, and we were shooting a lot of nights. It was cold, boy, I can tell you that. We bought all the long underwear in town.

You witnessed something special on the studio lot.

I was walking behind Burton across an empty sound stage – I was about twenty yards behind him – but he didn't know I was there. Then suddenly he saw this shaft light coming down right in front of him, there must have been a hole in the ceiling. So he stepped into the light, looked up and did this amazing speech, I guess it was from *Hamlet*. All I know is it sent chills down my spine. I couldn't believe it. Then he just walked on, as if nothing happened. He never knew I'd been watching him.

Nichols must've been worried about Elizabeth Taylor's age, since she was supposed to play about twenty years older.

We shot make-up tests until they were coming out of our ears. First they put lines every place, and she looked old enough, but you saw the pencil lines. Mike sweated that out quite a bit, but in the end

they didn't put much make-up on her. She did gain weight for the part, and had a double chin, which helped.

Along with the smudgy mascara, lipstick and the gray-streaked wig. And she wasn't difficult, she wasn't vain about it?

No, she was really nice. She was into it. She even picked this one blouse that bunched up so her stomach would show. And she would make sure she smeared her lipstick so it would match the previous shot, stuff like that. She really didn't care how bad she looked, she was a pro. There was also a scene we shot outside the roadhouse where she was trying to hit George and he hurled her away. She kept hitting her head against the car, and didn't complain, but they did have a doctor examine her to make sure she was okay.

Was Mike worried about her acting abilities?

Well, he knew what she was, you don't fool him about that kinda shit. And he would say, "She doesn't make this moment." And he'd have her do it again and again.

Was she better than he thought she'd be?

I think so.

When I saw it recently I didn't remember how good she was.

Me neither, boy.

Sandy Dennis was great, too. She was actually pregnant and then miscarried during shooting. Was it when she fell in that scene?

I heard Mike say he thought that might have caused it, but he did tell her to be careful.

What did you think of George Segal's performance?

I liked him okay, but, well, just look at the scene where he and Burton were drunk. Burton didn't play drunk, Segal did. That's the difference.

Warner had to be talked into hiring Richard Burton.

But he was dynamite.

Burton – the moody Welshman – was tougher to work with than his wife.

Oh yeah.

What would he do?

He'd just walk off the set if he got mad. He didn't give a fuck. If anybody could intimidate Mike, it was Richard Burton.

Because?

[Imitating Burton's deep voice] "What do you mean I don't do this?" [Growls]

But he was usually right.

What did Taylor do when he did that?

If she didn't agree, she'd argue with him.

There was some of George and Martha in the Burton/Taylor relationship: the public fighting, the game playing, the love/hate interdependency.

So I heard. But they got along fine, everybody got along. It's just that Mike used to get pissed because they would take long lunches. They had a dressing room up in the main building, this big suite, and they partied.

Another thing they had in common with George and Martha: the drinking. When they were called back to the set after lunch, what would they do?

They'd say, "We'll be down." Meanwhile, Mike was going crazy. He'd walk around saying, "Cocksuckers, I hate their fuckin' guts," and cry to me that they were costing him time. When they finally came back late, they'd just ignore it all, be real nice. "Hey, Mike, old buddy, sorry we're late, okay let's shoot."

What did they drink?

Lancers wine. Burton would drink brandy to get drunk, but not while they were shooting.

So they wouldn't come back drunk, just a little buzzed.

Yeah. But sometimes they wouldn't come back until five o'clock and they had in

their contract that they couldn't work past six o'clock.

God, that's horrible.

Yeah, if you're the director it is. Mike ended up being thirty days over schedule and doubling the budget. The studio thought about kicking Mike off the movie. They tried, but they knew if they fired Mike, the Burtons would both walk.

Did Mike and Jack Warner ever have a confrontation?

Warner wouldn't fight with anyone directly. But in one scene where George rang the doorbell, Martha said, "Fuck you" in the play, Mike changed it to "Screw you," and Warner said we had to put "Goddamn you" in her mouth, which is a long way from "Fuck you" and "Screw you." And Mike tried to fight that. Also, Mike had been going to New York on the weekends doing commercials with Elaine May, then flying back Monday morning, so Warner said, "Is he doing that or doing this?"

There was also a fight over the composer.



Ernie signed Alex North as the composer. He was considered tops in Hollywood, but Mike didn't want him, he wanted Andre Previn. I said, "Mike, they already signed him [North] and that's money, don't fight with Warner, don't push him into a corner." But Mike didn't give a shit, he wanted Andre Previn. So he kept fighting and that was the last straw, that's what finally did it. That was just before Warner threw him off the lot. Mike and I were working in the cutting room, we'd just finished shooting a couple weeks before, when they told him he had four more days to finish the movie.

And Mike didn't fight it?

Sure, he yelled about it, but there was nothing he could do. The guards were told not to let him in.

Yet Sinatra got away with so much waste, so much bullshit.

Yeah. Well, Sinatra had his own unit on the lot, it was "Sinatra Productions." And with Mike it was about a lot of things that had been building and building.

Mike said it was standard practice for Warner to fire directors because he liked to have his pictures finished as quickly as possible and let his departments do that.

That's true to a degree, but Warner would've given him at least a little more time if he hadn't been pissed.

So you worked day and night for those four days, and finished before he was kicked off the lot?

I remember at one point I was sitting on a stool, laughing at something, and I was so tired I actually blacked out. And then for the last reel, I met Mike at the studio at 5:00 in the morning and we worked until midnight. I was just a walking zombie. I'd say, "I got to take a walk to clear my head just for a minute," but we finished. Then they wouldn't even let Mike mix [supervise the process where technicians combine music, sound effects, and dialogue into a single sound track]. I mixed the picture and at the end of each day I'd call Mike and hold the phone up so he could listen. And he would make comments like, "Can you bring the music down there, I don't think we need that sound." We did that every day for about a month.

Mike said that was a "remarkably brave thing" for you to do because if Warner had found out he would have blackballed you from every studio.

It could have happened, I guess. It's amazing really to think that there were seven or eight guys [studio heads] who could just call each other and that would be the end of you.

Did Warner worry about the movie being too talky?

No, just too vulgar. But Warner did stand behind the movie and kept most of the dialogue the way it was.



What did you think of the movie?

I wasn't worried about it, but I didn't know what we had. We didn't know.

Tell about the screening at the Pantages Theatre.

It was the world premiere, it was a full house, invited people and press, and Mike and I sat in the back row. Well, like I said, we had no idea what we had and Mike was a basket case. So the picture started and he said, "That's a light print. Jesus!" And I said, "Come on, Mike, settle down." But he kept moaning and groaning throughout the screening, that it was too dark and too light and at the end of it, Mike said, "Let's get out of here. I don't want to see anybody." So we ran out, got in his car, and drove away. And everybody was looking for him, looking all over. But he just couldn't face them, he thought it was a disaster. But the audience had been great, they'd laughed throughout the movie.

Then the movie came out and you got raves.

They loved the movie, they just loved it. The reviews called it the best movie ever made, said that Mike Nichols was a genius.

How did Mike deal with all that?

Very well. [Laughs]

When you see the movie now, anything you would change?

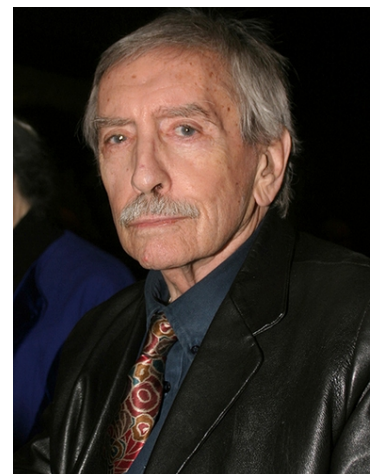
Yeah, a few cuts I would've fixed. But, basically, my first cut is the final cut.

Edward Albee said:

"The most profound indication of social malignancy...no sense of humor. None of the monoliths could take a joke."

American critics are like American universities. They both have dull and half-dead faculties.

Albee describes his work as "an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, and emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."



George & Martha said:

George: You take the trouble to construct a civilization...to build a society based on the principles of...you make government and art, and realize that they are, must be, both the same...you bring things to the saddest of all points...to the point where there is something to lose...then all at once, through all the music, through all the sensible sounds of men building, attempting, comes the Dies Irae. And what is it? What does the trumpet sound? Up yours.

Martha: I looked at you tonight and you weren't there...And I'm gonna howl it out, and I'm not gonna give a damn what I do and I'm gonna make the biggest god-damn explosion you've ever heard.

George: Try and I'll beat you at your own game.

Martha: Is that a threat George, huh?

George: It's a threat, Martha.

Martha: You're gonna get it, baby.

George: Be careful Martha. I'll rip you to pieces.

Martha: You're not man enough.

You haven't the guts. George: Total war. Martha: Total.



George: All I said was that our son, the apple of our three eyes, Martha being a cyclops, our son is a beanbag and you get testy.

Martha: You're all flops. I am the Earth Mother, and you are all flops. I disgust me. You know, there's only been one man in my whole life who's ever made me happy. Do you know that?...George, my husband...George, who is out somewhere there in the dark, who is good to me - whom I revile, who can keep learning the games we play as quickly as I can change them. Who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy. Yes, I do wish to be happy. George and Martha: Sad, sad, sad...Whom I will not forgive for having come to rest; for having seen me and having said: yes, this will do; who has made the hideous, the hurting, the insulting mistake of loving me and must be punished for it. George and Martha: Sad, sad, sad...Some day, hah! Some night, some stupid, liquor-ridden night, I will go too far and I'll either break the man's back or I'll push him off for good which is what I deserve.

Martha: Truth and illusion, George. You don't know the difference.

George: No, but we must carry on as though we did.

Martha: Amen.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXI:

October 19 Francis Ford Coppola *The Godfather* 1972

October 26 Hal Ashby *The Last Detail* 1973

November 2 Bruce Beresford *Tender Mercies* 1983

November 9 Wim Wenders *Wings of Desire* 1987

November 16 Charles Crichton *A Fish Called Wanda* 1988

November 23 Joel & Ethan Coen *The Big Lebowski* 1998

November 30 Chan-wook Park *Oldboy* 2003

December 7 Deepa Mehta *Water* 2005

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