

# CRASHING CAA

I arrive at Creative Artist Agency's I.M. Pei-designed headquarters on Wilshire Boulevard, in Beverly Hills, across the street from Wilson's House of Leather, shortly after 7:30 p.m. I have illicitly obtained an invitation to a party the agency is throwing for its assistants in the motion picture department. The assistants, in turn, were told to invite their phone friends from various production companies and other allied industries around town. I give my car to a valet at the curb and prepare to enter the largest pool of ambitious, young Hollywood piranhas ever gathered in one place.

The average American filmgoer may not know or care, but Creative Artists Agency (CAA) is considered to be the most powerful agency in Hollywood, with a client list that includes Kevin Costner, Sylvester Stallone, Michael Douglas, Sean Connery, Robert DeNiro, Jane Fonda, Martin Scorsese and Meryl Streep, among others. Michael Ovitz is its head, or, as the Japanese would say, its big oyabun ("boss"). Why mention the Japanese? Well, he is a great fan of Japanese-style management. Such a big fan that he thought it might be good if the Japanese owned a little bit more of America. Ovitz helped broker Matsushita's buyout of MCA and is now rumored to be talking with Toshiba about helping them acquire a controlling portion of Time-Warner, Inc. The fact that Toshiba was nearly barred from selling their products in the U.S. several years ago after the F.B.I. discovered they were selling military secrets to the Soviets is enough to make xenophobes out the best of us.

Is CAA destroying our country or, worse yet, are they damaging films by packaging deals with little care for art (Kevin Costner as Robin Hood!?) and maximum regard for their own bottom line (stacking films with CAA clients)? By mingling with the company's peons,

I'm hoping to get a glimpse inside the soul of the agency, or at least glom some free food and booze at Big Mike's expense.

Entering through the building's large glass doors, I am greeted by well-groomed young blond man in a stylish-but-conservative suit. Simply a faceless automaton or obvious instrument of evil?

"I" am found on the list, given a nametag to fill out, and reminded to add my company affiliation on it. Feeling resentment at the thought of having my character defined by my employer and unwilling to tarnish the reputation of the person whose name I borrowed to gain admittance, I become *Brad Monroe of Mighty Boffo Prods.* With my latest identity prominently affixed to my lapel, I wind my way straight to the open bar.

The crowd appears to be mostly in their 20s, and they are dressed in a variety of styles that range from Armani-suit business formal to David Geffen blue-jeans-'n'-sport-shirt casual. When I get to the bar I find that they're serving wine and beer, domestic on both fronts. No sake? Strange, yet reassuring.

As I sip my Bud Light, I gaze up at the humongus Roy Lichtenstein painting that rises nearly to the top of the building's three-story high atrium. It depicts several faceless men and women attired in business wear ascending a staircase, apparently on their way to work. While disturbing, the faceless kobun ("worker") depicted in the painting is perfectly in sync with the Japanese ideal, where individual identity is subordinate to that of the group. Americans are taught to stand out and make themselves noticed. The Japanese believe *deru kugi utareru* ("the nail that sticks up is hit").

Not wanting to be that nail, I search for someone to join me in an exchange

of witty cocktail banter. Soon, I find myself talking to genuine CAA assistant. Is it nice here? I ask. Yes it is, she says.

I point to some beefy Secret Service types by the elevator. "Are those guys security?" I ask.

"Uh-huh."

"Are they just here for the party?"

"No they're always here."

"Are they the foot soldiers who go marching up and down Wilshire Blvd.?"

"Oh," she giggles. "You're so silly!"

Hmm.... She seems kind of nice. Did I come here with a chip on my shoulder?

I move across the room to the buffet, which is set up near a John Chamberlain sculpture made from demolished auto parts. I wonder aloud about the contents of some flaky meat 'n' mushroom hors d'oeuvres, setting off a conversation with a man and woman who seem to be representing the crowd's alternative fringe. He is a lanky figure in a black sportscoat that's slightly small around the shoulders and short in the sleeves. She is buxom and full-lipped, wearing a dark velvet blazer with faux leopard-skin lapels and pocket flaps. At first, they are a refreshing change of pace from all the studied ambition. At first.

She tells me they have a project "in development." It's not going to be that usual Hollywood crap. She's going to direct and he's going to star.

"What's it called?" I ask, as the needle on my bullshit detector swings wildly into the red zone.

"*Cosmochrist*," she says proudly. "Look around, every woman in this room is a Cosmo woman."

Eagerly, I do, but the crowd is bereft of tall, scantily-clad exotic models in search of the ultimate multiorgasmic experience. Beautiful people work in front of the camera. Agent's





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assistants—men and women alike—are generally small, rodentlike creatures clawing with underhanded ferociousness in an effort to ascend to the next rung on the ladder.

"I hate this town," she says. "These people—everything—it's such bullshit!"

Maybe the leopard-skin-lapels girl is jealous. Maybe we all are. At CAA, they get to work with the biggest artists in the film biz. They may have the Hollywood dream job. After all, if you can't be one of the most talented people in entertainment, why not package the people who are?

I suddenly become aware of a woman staring at my left lapel. She's smiling and squinting at my name tag, trying to look pleasant, but I can hear the gears turning in her head—Is he a possible connection or a complete waste of time?

"Mighty Boffo Prods.?", she queries. "Is that a joke?"

"No," I say, as if offended.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she says feigning embarrassment and humility. "What do you guys do?"

I tell her that were a new production entity established by a group of Austrian investors who want to channel some petro-marks into the American film industry. Just between you and me, Costner very interested in one of our projects. But, tell me, do you see him as Abraham Lincoln?

She furrows her brow and opens her mouth, looking as if she is pain. No words come forth.

"I think he's too short" I say. "What do you think?"

"Uh...It was nice talking to you."

—Warren Donovan

### TIRED OF RENTING THE SAME VIDEOS?

Low-budget writer/director RIF COOGAN (*The Invisible Maniac*) found himself in uncharted territory after a close friend offered him a videotape of *Guinea Pig*, a film of Asian origin that is rumored to contain actual "snuff" action, i.e. a real murder perpetrated solely for the entertainment of the demented viewer. Though repelled by the concept, Coogan had his doubts about the film's authenticity and watched it in the company of close friend, CHARLIE SHEEN. Both were horrified to find they could not convincingly explain how such grisly "special effects" could be done, prompting the shocked Sheen to call the Federal Bureau of Investigation. They were informed by Special Agent Dan Codling that the FBI and their Japanese counterparts were already involved in the case and asked to please relinquish the suspicious cassette. They did. Further legwork determined that CHAS BALUN, editor of horror magazine *Deep Red*, was partially responsible for the film's underground distribution. Balun fiercely contended that the film was not real, and the systematic dismemberment that served as *Guinea Pig's* highlight was simply a series of astounding effects.

Fortunately, he was soon proved correct by FBI experts. Coogan and Sheen were both commended for their civic-minded responsiveness to the situation.

### THE SNEAK PEAK

Over unsalted margaritas in a cheesy Mexican restaurant I was invited (sort of) to a nonindustry, no-press-allowed screening of *The Dark Half*, Pittsburgh-based writer/director GEORGE (*Night of the Living Dead*,

*Creepshow*, *Monkey Shines*) ROMERO's latest STEPHEN KING adaptation. Starring TIMOTHY HUTTON, AMY MADIGAN and MICHAEL ROOKER, this psychodrama (and the novel before it) was inspired by King's coming clean about ghostwriting several schlocky novels under the name Richard Bachman (one of which was *The Running Man*, itself the basis for a schlocky 1987 Schwarzenegger actioner).

The bearlike director prefaced the film with a brief explanation that it was unfinished: the music was all wrong, there were some optical effects left to do, the final three or four minutes would be missing, etc. With a smile, he mentioned that he would welcome comments about what changes could be made, as this cut was running about 15 minutes too long. Fair enough, he wanted criticism.

An iconoclast who has escaped the worst aspects of Hollywood and still managed to make films, Romero is a populist Kubrick, whose social commentary never approaches pretension or leads him astray from his main intention: i.e. scaring the hell out of his loyal audience. Like David Cronenberg, Romero is one of the very few directors who makes horror films because he genuinely loves the genre.

Instead of telling him what I thought—as he asked—I bit my tongue and walked by in zombielike reverence. While I should have told him that the recurring bird motif was too recurring, Tim Hutton was badly miscast, Michael Rooker was underused, and Amy Madigan's character degenerates into a whining cliché, my words were overcome by a deep sense of admiration. An act, in hindsight, which can only be seen as the greatest disrespect.

—Rowdy Yates