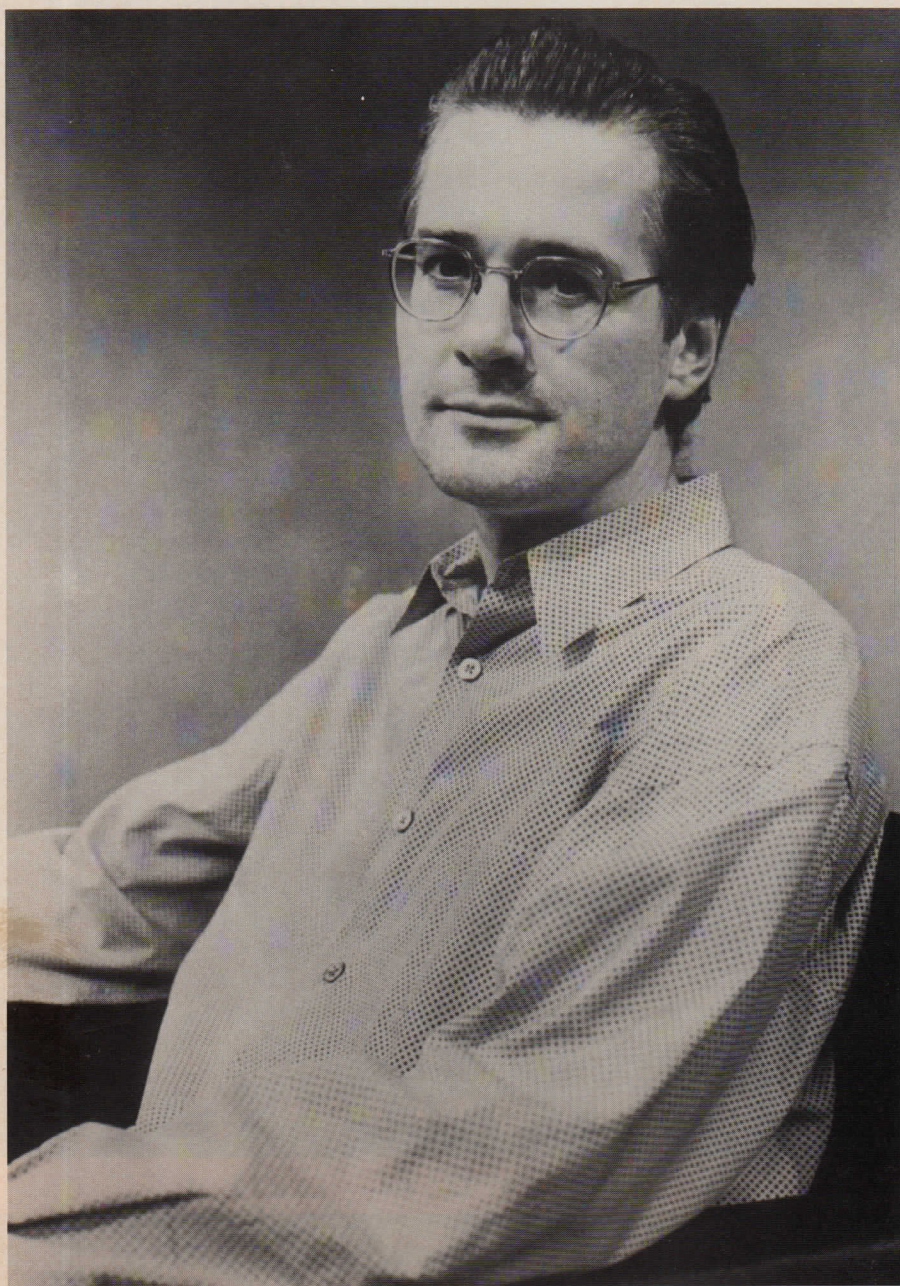


John Patrick Shanley

by Gerard Raymond



Somewhere in this town, a movie producer with a chronic rectal problem is shifting uncomfortably in his seat now that John Patrick Shanley's *Four Dogs and a Bone* has arrived at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles. This particular man stiffed Shanley for \$25,000 during the playwright's early days in Hollywood. Now, renamed Bradley, he's literally and figuratively a pain in the butt in Shanley's play, an hilarious look at the backstabbing world of the movie industry.

Ask Shanley about that Hollywood experience from nearly a decade ago and the New York-based playwright launches into a little monologue, sounding a bit like one his loquacious stage characters: "He stole it from me basically. If a guy steals \$25,000 from me through intimidation and extortion and one day I get to make fun of him for doing that, well my God, that seems like the most harmless kind of revenge. Years ago what you did was you took a gun and shot the guy. Now I make fun of him and people get to laugh a little bit. I even changed the names, so what the hell do they have to bitch about? They got the \$25,000. And I needed it a lot more than they did!"

Well, Shanley doesn't need that 25 grand so much today. The 45-year-old playwright has made a small fortune in the movie business since that brush with the venal producer; he won an Oscar for the screenplay of *Moonstruck* and has both written and directed movies for Spielberg's Amblin Pictures. Most recently, he adapted Michael Crichton's *Congo* for the screen, a box-office, if not critical hit this summer. And before we begin our interview, Shanley gives me a tour of his new home, an historic three-story townhouse

that he is restoring in New York's Greenwich Village.

The four "dogs" in Shanley's play are two actresses (played by Parker Posey and Elizabeth Perkins), a screenwriter (Brendan Fraser), and the hemorrhoidal producer (played by Martin Short). They literally go at each other like dogs over a bone in an effort to take control of a movie in production. The two actresses each want to cut the other out of the picture, the producer doesn't have the money to cover the insurance, and the screenwriter is a playwright from off-Broadway (like Shanley himself), who is learning how to lose his soul in the business fast. Shanley's four characters will sleep with, lie to, or plain steal from each other without the slightest hesitation, in their pursuit of fame and money.

Doesn't it seem a tad ungrateful on Shanley's part to bash the business which has brought him considerable material comfort? Of course there is a time-honored precedent for this. East Coast playwright is lured to Hollywood, makes money, and then pens a satire on the movie industry: David Mamet did it in *Speed-the-Plow* and David Rabe in *Hurly Burly*. The tradition goes at least as far back as F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Last Tycoon*.

"I was kind. *I was kind*," Shanley insists. "I did not make that stuff up! And the playwright is just as venal and duplicitous — with himself and with others — as everybody else. Only he just doesn't know it yet. At the end of the play the writer is the biggest monster in the room."

His characters' behavior is only a manifestation of human nature, says Shanley. "I have watched it happen to people next to me," he continues, describing the crazy look of people who have dreams of glory which make them lose all sense of morality. He adds that he himself has not been immune to the temptations of fame and fortune. "I certainly went haywire, and I have not behaved always in a way that I am particularly proud of. I just try to notice when I am doing it, and at least to not be deluded that I am a noble, lovely person while I am stabbing somebody in the back."

I ask Shanley if the dog-eat-dog behavior he depicts in his play is more prevalent in the movie business, rather than in the theater. "Absolutely. It is less in the theater because there is not as much money. You see a lot of that kind of behavior from writers, directors, and actors in the theater when they are about

to go up against the New York press, but it is nothing like film."

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Let's pause for a look at Shanley's background. The playwright was born in a rough Irish-Italian neighborhood in the Bronx. He has written about his early life in a searingly autobiographical play, *Beggars in the House of Plenty* (1991), and in the first movie he wrote, *Five Corners* (1988). The image of a Bronx ruffian doesn't immediately come to mind when you first meet the good-looking, mild-mannered playwright, but Shanley himself will tell you he went through a violent period; for six years he was a member of The Apollos, a Bronx street gang. But, he says shrugging, "My childhood was no worse than most people's frankly. Everybody's whole life is extremely painful and difficult, as well as exciting and good."

Not a very promising student but a voracious reader, Shanley was educated at a Catholic grammar school. "I don't have the big nightmare stories about the nuns," he says. "They weren't great, but they gave me a decent education and they had good literature laying around for you to read." He enrolled in New York University, but he decided he wasn't emotionally ready for college so instead he joined the Marine Corps, and he loved it. "Let me tell you, they did make a man out of me," he says laughing. "Now I know other people who were broken, but I was just fortunate that it happened to agree with me, and I came out of there a more focussed person." After his stint with the Marines, he returned to NYU where he took a playwriting course which set him on his career path.

"I was born a very particular person, no question about it," says Shanley. "I had an artistic impulse inside of me." He says he wrote poems from the age of 11 and even wrote a novel which he later burned. But because of the NYU class he started writing dialogue. "And suddenly I knew I had found my form."

At a recent seminar, covered by *The Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, Shanley told the audience that he was foremost an emotional writer: "I write a play because I do not want to stay where I am...It's an uncomfortable place and therefore very powerful." Writing is part of his life, he explains to me: "If I am not living while I am writing then something's wrong and I am writing badly. So it is an actual scene in my life, not [one] that I am replaying, but that I am actually playing." *Beggars in the House of Plenty* took him five years to complete, Shanley says, because it dealt with painful memories of his family and

he needed sufficient distance from the events to write about it.

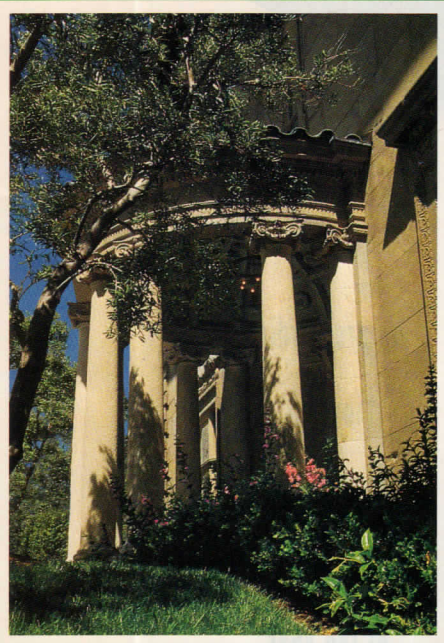
Even when adapting someone else's stories for the screen — *Alive* and *Congo* — Shanley says he finds a personal way into the material. In the case of *Alive*, the factual story of how members of an Uruguayan soccer team managed to survive (through cannibalism) after their plane crashed in the Andes, Shanley says he felt he had a grip on the characters because he could relate on a certain level to their ordeal. "I was raised in a hostile environment in the Bronx, and had to learn a way to survive there. I really understood their values, which were very like early 1960s values, and they were also educated by Irish Christian brothers." You have to dig deeper to discover his personal ties to *Congo*, but Shanley lets on that the relationship between the gorillas and the adults in the movie is inspired by his own relationship with his sons, two toddlers he adopted a few years ago.

So it is no surprise that writing *Four Dogs and a Bone* was a form of therapy for Shanley. In this instance, he went back to the past in order to cope with something in the present. "I was in such a rage with some film people I had just dealt with that I couldn't function. But I couldn't write about this because it would be just railing, so I decided to write about something that happened long ago, which I am now cool about. I took an amalgam of different mishaps or worse that I had in film from those years ago, characters that I ran into, and fueled it with anger that I felt from the moment I was in."

Playwrights so often complain that their work gets trashed in Hollywood. Not Shanley. Even though he vents his anger and frustrations with the business in *Four Dogs*, the surprise is that he actually enjoys working in the movies; he even professes to be happy with how his work has been realized on the screen. In fact, he seems to imply that those people who have unhappy experiences may perhaps bring it upon themselves in some way. "What you fear will come true," he says. "I think that each person's experience has a lot to do with who they are." More importantly, Shanley believes that working in the movies has actually enhanced his skill as a playwright. But before we get to that, I ask him about *Joe vs. the Volcano*.

For the first time in our conversation, Shanley gets a bit defensive. The \$30 million movie which he wrote and directed is generally considered a disappointment. But Shanley believes he has taken a lot of unwarranted flack for the 1990 Warner

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Brothers comedy/fantasy/adventure about a young man who gets a new lease on life after he discovers he has only six months to live. Shanley is eager to correct the notion that the film was a flop, reeling off the number of the newspapers around the country (with the notable exception of *The New York Times*) that gave the film good notices, and asserting that it made a modest profit after it was released on video. In many respects it was quite a coup for a novice director to land a movie produced by Spielberg's company and starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. Shanley is not above giving himself a little pat on the back: "I had never taken a directing course and I was doing typhoons and special effects. I think if you go back and [consider] this is the work of a first time director, you'll say he did a pretty amazing job. It is a very beautiful and finished-looking film."

Shanley says the experience of writing for the screen has brought to his plays a broader vision. He cites his 1988 romantic comedy *Italian-American Reconciliation* as an example of how his craft was influenced by his movie experiences. "You can develop one idea and then you develop another, and you can have the audience go away for the intermission and come back with an expectation, and then you go further with that. Those shifting structural elements I learned to do in film."

He is currently writing an epic play, based on the autobiography of the 16th-century Italian metalsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, which marks a new milestone in Shanley's writing. Up to now, his plays have required small casts and have all been about contemporary subjects. Shanley's *Cellini* has about 30 roles for a company of about 10 actors and is the largest scale work he has ever attempted. It will be the first of his plays that is suited to a production in a Broadway-sized theater. (Hitherto, all his plays have been produced in intimate spaces like the second stage at Off-Broadway's Manhattan Theater Club, where *Four Dogs* premiered in 1993.) The new play is possible, Shanley says, only because of the new skills he acquired from adapting *Alive* and *Congo* for the movies. "I have these new, structural, adaptive skills [with which] I could express something that I couldn't express before, and on a much bigger canvas."

There are two other Shanley plays in the pipeline, which will be produced before he completes writing *Cellini*. One is a long one-act titled *Kissing Christine* ("very dramatic and philosophical") which is scheduled to debut at the 1996 Humana Festival at the Actors' Theater of

Louisville; the other, a comedy titled *Psychopathia Sexualis* will premiere at Seattle Repertory early in 1996 before arriving at Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum next May.

The title for *Psychopathia* is borrowed from the famous turn-of-the-century psychological treatise by Kraft Ebbing which records case histories of hysterical disorders. (Shanley says he found them very funny, even though they were not meant to be.) A lighthearted comedy about a man whose curious sexual fetish involves an old sock, *Psychopathia* incorporates Shanley's experiences about how men look at events in a completely different way from their wives. There are also several dreams which are described, analyzed and reanalyzed in the course of the play, which Shanley says are all his own. "Everything I do is based on something that is extremely personal to me," he reiterates. "Every single, bloody thing I do."

But back to *Four Dogs and a Bone*, his depiction of moviemaking as a squabbling and backbiting melee among animals, which is now playing near the very hub of the industry that Shanley lampoons. Will he be able to have lunch in this town again? Sure he will. Hollywood insiders love to be made fun of (unless you are a producer with a sore bottom maybe). In fact, one famous Hollywood name that is most enthusiastic about *Four Dogs* is the man who is making his debut as a theater director with the production at the Geffen — none other than filmmaker Lawrence Kasdan, screenwriter of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and director of *Body Heat* and *The Big Chill*. "The play is not as caustic as it appears," says Kasdan in a phone interview. "It's a clear-eyed view of the business, and finally it is a valentine to all the people who stick with it. I think it is the perfect play for L.A." □

Gerard Raymond is a free-lance writer on theater and film and lives in New York City. His work has appeared in TheaterWeek, Out Magazine, The Village Voice, and The Washington Post.

