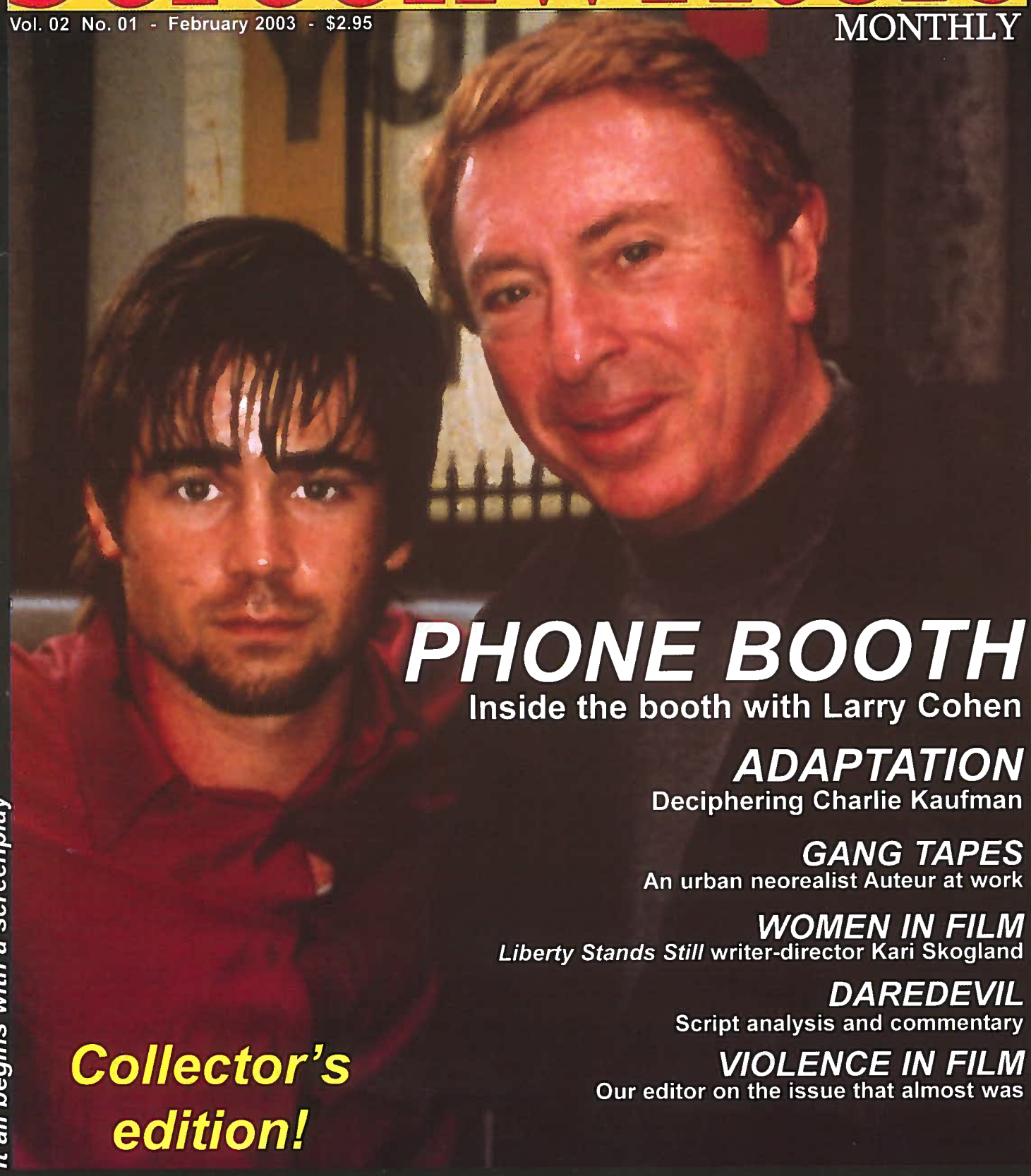
PHONE BOOTH * ADAPTATION * GANG TAPES * WOMEN IN FILM

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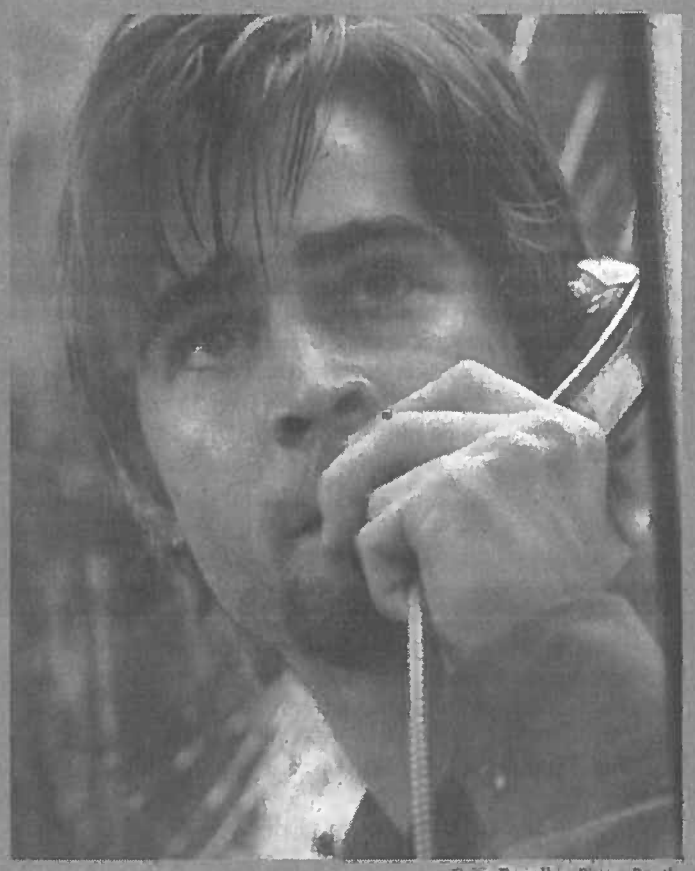
Collector's edition!

It all begins with a screenplay

Phone Booth

Inside the booth with Larry Cohen

by Harry Caul



Colin Farrell in *Phone Booth*

Born and raised in New York City, writer-director-producer Larry Cohen is an accomplished independent auteur with more than thirty years of experience and over 20 pictures to his credit. Perhaps most impressively he began his writing career at a young age, while still in high school, selling his first scripts to television. Cohen has created a unique body of work that truly defines him as a filmmaker. So it was interesting when this experienced writer-director was designed an "overnight" success in December of 1998 after selling the high profile thriller spec script *Phone Booth* to 20th Century Fox. "I went from a B movie director, to an A list screenwriter overnight," says Cohen.

As a filmmaker he has never fit the mold. In 1972, *Film Comment* pronounced Cohen's film *Bone* to be a "seething indictment of post-counterculture attitudes toward success and race relations, set against the backdrop of L.A. affluence." Not afraid to mix it up a little, the writer-director crossed over to make blaxploitation hits *Black Caesar* and *Hell Up in Harlem*. As a maverick filmmaker he continued to address spiritual, social, cultural, and political themes with films such as *God Told Me To*, *The Stuff*, and *The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover*. Cohen also wrote some high profile projects in the 70s and 80s, including *Return of the Magnificent Seven* and *Best Seller*, starring James Woods and Brian Dennehy.

After his highly publicized 1998 spec sale, Cohen continued to make headlines in 1999 with his $750,000 sale to Centropolis for *Cellular* which centers on a random phone call from a women on a cell phone claiming to have been kidnapped. Pleading, she somehow convinces the person on the other end of the line to help her. Unsure of her whereabouts and unable to offer many clues, the protagonist must find her before she and her cell phone battery dies.

More recently, in September of 2002, Cohen sold his thriller spec *Alive* to Morgan Creek for a mid-six figures. Once again, much like *Phone Booth* and *Cellular*, the story unfolds over a short period of time (two hours) as a fugitive tries to save the life of his alleged murder victim.

With *Phone Booth* (20th Century Fox) set to be released in early 2003, we sat down with the writer to discuss his career, and what it was like writing in a phone booth.

***Phone Booth*, directed by Joel Shumacher, stars Colin Farrell, Forest Whitaker, and Katie Holmes.**

You've made 20 movies in your career and never lost money?

Two of them were for cable and 18 were theatrical, but yeah, my company never lost money. We were never in a situation like some filmmakers who have to mortgage their house or something. The people who've invested in our pictures have always come out all right.

I understand you started your career as a television writer when you were in high school?

I lived in New York and was fortunate enough to have immediate access to the industry. I told everyone I was twenty-one, but I was really seventeen. You had to be twenty-one to sign the contracts. So I went around to company after company until I found someone who would talk to me and look at my work. Even though they didn't buy anything I kept going back showing them what I had. If they wanted a mystery or teenage drama I would write it for nothing and take it back to them, and they would say "Gee this is very good, but it's not what we're looking for." They would always look at the next piece I brought. I just decided if I did this enough I'd wear them down and they would feel guilty and probably hire me to do something. Eventually, I got them to the point where they felt guilty about this kid wandering in off the street and they gave me an assignment. Ed McBain had just put out the first or second of his *87th Precinct* novels, which

there are now about forty of them, and they wanted to do an original television movie based on those characters. I was paid $1500 for that task and suddenly I was a working writer.

But after awhile everything dried up and nothing was happening. It was kind of embarrassing, I'd see friends and they'd ask when my next show was coming on and I had nothing. Then I went to Hollywood for almost a year and nothing materialized. I returned to New York in defeat. But I continued to try and eventually sold some things and a few other shows materialized. I struggled along for a few years after that making a living, selling a script here and there. I had my first big break when I sold some scripts to *The Defenders* television show, and that opened the door for me because that was the number one show. Over a period of two and half years I wrote about nine episodes and that established me as a writer of some note. I also wrote episodes of *Espionage*.

Pretty soon other shows were calling wanting me to write for them, so I ended up returning to the West coast. I wrote the first episode of *Arrest and Trial*, a ninety-minute show that was really the prototype for *Law & Order*. Both produced by Universal. I also wrote for *The Fugitive* and *Rat Patrol*. I was doing very well and making a lot of money for the first time. I then thought of creating my own series, which lead to *Branded* with Chuck Conners, *The Invaders*, and *Cool Million*. So for a while there I was the hottest pilot writer in Hollywood.

Then I started writing feature film screenplays. The first one I wrote was *The Return of the Magnificent Seven*, the sequel to the original starring Yul Brynner. The picture was a big hit, even bigger than the original because it didn't have a first run like the sequel. So then I had a successful movie under my belt and was able to sell some more scripts, *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting*, which Mark Robson directed badly, and a Western called *El Condor*.

How did you teach yourself the craft of screenwriting?
My basic education was going to the movies. I was always a movie freak since I was a little kid. I went to the movies and sat through them twice. I learned the techniques this way. I just assimilated it. I new structure and form and just inherently could do it. It was one of those things where someone can pick something up right away and just do it. When I was a kid, about eight years old, I was doing my own comic books. I used to draw sixty-page books, six panels on a page. I always wrote dramatic and intricate stories, something you would not expect from an eight year old kid. I spent countless days on each story. I worked out the plot and all the dialogue, it was not unlike storyboarding a movie. I took movie going seriously, I didn't go with friends. I went by myself and never sat in the children's section, which they had in those days. I wanted to concentrate on the movie, and you couldn't do that in the children's section. To me that's what I went there for. Usually they had to throw me out of the theater when it got to be six or seven at night, after I'd been there since noon. I was happy at the movies. It was something I looked forward to. I particularly liked Warner Bros. with Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, and Edward G. Robinson. I liked the stories, music, cutting and the pace of those movies was better than any of the other studios at the time.

When you sit down to write, how do you approach each story? What is your process?
Well, the most fun is when I don't know what's going to happen next. That's the greatest pleasure you can get out of writing as far as I'm concerned. If you have everything laid out in advance that takes away from the mystery and magic of sitting there in your own world writing. If you can jump in at an interesting situation with interesting characters and let them take you for a ride, and allow the characters to come to life, then you can't wait to get back to writing the next day because you'll be excited at where they will take you. You're just like the audience, you're caught up in what is going to unfold. Every well conceived story will structure itself as you write it. I used to work very late at night until four in the morning. I would be so mentally exhausted that my subconscious was doing almost all the work. I'd get up the next day and read what I had written, and I would have little recollection of what I wrote.

What is a Larry Cohen film?
I don't know. B films and A films can only be categorized twenty-five years after the picture has been made. You look back and say, "Which pictures do I remember, which really effected me, which were truly original and hold up over the years?" Strangely enough the pictures that really hold up after all these years are the so-called B movies. They were stark, hard hitting, lean and sometimes avant-garde in their own way. I sometimes referred to my movies as "quickies" because of the shooting schedule, we always shot them in eighteen days. Long days, fourteen-hour days. They were quick. We worked hard and fast, but I think that produced an energetic quality in the films.

When you write, do budget concerns come in to play?
I never think about the budget. I really never worry about that when I'm writing a story. I write it as I have to tell it. I'm setting up to do a picture now that takes place in ancient Rome. I know that we will not have the ability to construct gigantic sets, so I have to write a picture that's feasible to make in the first place, particularly if it's something I'm going to direct myself. The most ambitious I ever was, was when we made *The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover*, which is a picture that takes place over a forty-eight year period and covers the entire life and career of Hoover. It required a lot of sets, costumes, old cars, and was a big undertaking that I never thought I would direct myself. But then it became apparent to me that if I was going to ever get it made I'd have to do it myself. So I just jumped into it. We didn't have the money to finish the picture, but I still started production in hopes of finding financing for the rest of it.

Well, for example, in *It's Alive*, almost all of the violence is off screen. So right away I assumed that's because of budget concerns?
I did it because it was more effective, not for budgetary concerns. I think inferred violence is also more effective than outright bloodshed. There's no point to that. It's more fun cinematically to manipulate the audience then it is to shock them with violence. Make the audience feel something with crafty writing and filmmaking. Learn to get a rise out of an audience by making them fear something they don't see right away. A lot of that can be done on the editing side, but you can dictate that during the writing.

The editing techniques we used was an outgrowth of the Val Lewton school of filmmaking. He produced those low budget RKO thrillers like the original *Body Snatchers*, *Cat People*, *Leopard Man*, and a lot of those films that were probably shot in a week but yet maintained themselves as classics. Hitchcock was able to

manipulate audiences in the same way. Notably in *Rear Window* when you see Jimmy Stewart's reaction after seeing what he's looking at. Whenever Hitchcock wanted to create that reaction he was able to do so by simply intercutting different scenes.

Subjective treatment.
Yeah, that's right. That's a lot of fun to be able to do that in your film. In *It's Alive*, we had this monster baby. Now if we showed it running around you'd get tired of looking at it. I realized the best thing to do is not show it. We'll hear it, know it's in the room, see it's point of view. This was before *Jaws* came along. In *Jaws* they had to do this same thing because they couldn't get the shark to work. They added that music score as well. The scariest parts of that movie are when you don't see the shark. I think Spielberg got some of that from *It's Alive*, because I know he saw it as he told me he enjoyed it. It worked really well in both pictures.

So you wrote *It's Alive* with the subjective treatment in mind?
Yes, absolutely.

You explored a lot of different themes and genres in your movies, blaxploitation for one.
Well the blaxploitation stuff came from being approached by Sammy Davis' junior's manager. Sammy wanted to have some movies where he starred in them himself instead of being the sidekick to Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. He wanted a vehicle that he could launch a movie career from. I suggested doing a black version of *Little Caesar*. I thought Sammy had that similar energy of a Edward G. Robinson or a James Cagney in *Public Enemy*. So they agreed to pay me ten-thousand dollars to write a treatment, which I did called *Black Caesar*. But by the time I turned it in Sammy was in financial trouble and had problems with the IRS, and they never paid me the money. So the rights to the material stayed with me. Sam Lochhoff, who was the President of American International, called me sometime later wanting to make black action movies and asked if I had anything in mind. He liked one of my pictures, *Bone*, which had a black actor (Yaphet Kotto), and he thought it was good. So he came to me and I gave him the treatment and had a deal immediately. I had always wanted to make a good old-fashion gangster movie, and this was a good way to do it.

When you're writing, are you setting the tone and mood of the story, or is that something you do in the directing and editing of the film?
No, I think the script sets the mood and tone of the story. It's got to be in the script. Directors might like you to believe their the ones who do it, but if it's not there in the script it's not going to get into the picture. If a story doesn't have tone or mood in the script, then there's something wrong. You should feel when you're reading the script what it's all about, and what the feeling of the movie is. Certainly a director can come in and change the mood and tone slightly, either for the better or worse. But it's got to be in the script first.



Larry Cohen

How much of an influence on your writing were those classics, Warner Bros. in particular, that you watched growing up?
Well I don't consciously copy anything. But I think I learned a little about the pace and economy of moving a story along from those movies. I preferred those to the big long overdone movies. Ones that could be effectively told in ninety minutes as opposed to two and half hours, where we spend too much time watching clever camera tricks instead of telling a story efficiently.

I read that your displeasure with mainstream movies lead to your writing *Phone Booth*?
Eventually it was a reaction to the over production of movies, where each film had to have a hundred explosions. Cars, planes, buildings all being blown to bits without any creative imagination and nothing at stake. People were being killed left and right and suddenly life was too cheap for anybody to care about anyone else's survival and the whole element of suspense was gone. I wanted to take a picture where we placed a hero in jeopardy and got the audience inside that character to experience the fear and gradual escalation of terror of the character. And I wanted to do it in the smallest possible space, a phone booth. For years I was trying to figure that out. For the longest time I couldn't make it work.

Early on the hero, Stu's character, is very unsympathetic.
The first people I showed the *Phone Booth* script to told me that Stu needed to be more sympathetic, and I said, "Well, then where

do we have to go with the character? If he's a nice guy before he gets in the booth where is he going to journey to?" Where this way if he's selfish and self-centered and learns something from the ordeal and leaves the phone booth as a different person, then we have a nice character arc. After awhile the resistance to it went away, and someone even wanted him to be a worse guy [laughs].

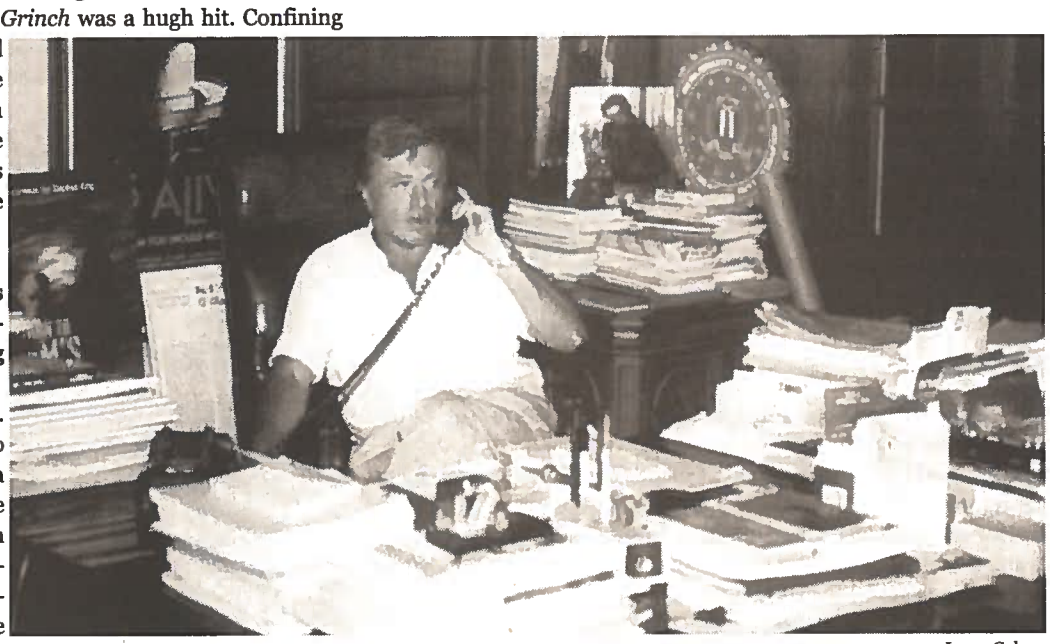
There were a lot of different actors rumored at one time or another to be interested in doing the film (Will Smith, Mel Gibson, Jim Carrey). What was the development process like?
Because so many big names were involved it was frustrating when they dropped out. I've made a lot of movies with moderate stars. I'd never had an opportunity to work with a box office star, and then one week I'm meeting with Mel Gibson everyday and we're discussing the story, and then it's over. We had Will Smith interested, and then he backed out.

Stu's character has to carry the story. I would think the thought of being in a phone booth for the whole movie was daunting.
I would think they were all nervous of being on camera for practically the whole movie and not being able to get out of the booth. When Jim Carry came on board I thought this is the best of both worlds. He's very popular. *The Grinch* was a hugh hit. Confining him to the phone booth with all his energy, pent up, he'd be bursting to get out. Then I got a call from Joel Shumacher, the director, who said Carrey was nervous about the role and he too backed out.

And now the studio starts second-guessing the material, after all these big names drop out.
Yeah, there was some concern. Suddenly I was looking at a go project being turned into a development deal. This is the worst possible thing that can happen. There was some second-guessing of the script, people wanted to rewrite the whole thing and go back to square one essentially. Fortunately, Colin Farrell emerged and that changed everything. At first, I wasn't too happy about it, because at the time he was an unknown. I went to see *Tigerland* and he was excellent. But still no one saw that. Then he was in *Minority Report,* but he wasn't the star. He also had *Hart's War*, and of course that was a disaster. So we were a little worried because *Phone Booth* was to come out next, but then the postponement of the film, and his other film *The Recruit* with Al Pacino will come out first and he has a very big part in that. I'm hoping that that picture helps us a little.

When the sniper shootings started, it must of put a lump in your throat.
Ah man, the trailer was in theaters and the billboard was in Times Square, the promotions and screenings, we were at the Toronto Film Festival already, and we had some good buzz and we thought we were on our way. Then the first shooting and another and another, and no end in sight. The studio became nervous because the sniper plays a big role in our picture and is diabolical. So it wouldn't have been appropriate at all to have our picture come out during that time. It would have been in poor taste to release it. In a way it was a break for us as it gives Colin more time to establish an audience for himself before we come out. You only get one opening.

From the first drafts to the shooting script, how much did the story change?
Very little. What you got was mostly what was there when I started. There were efforts to change the thing around but it never worked and we ended up going back to the original draft. It was laid out in such a way that when you started monkeying around with the structure it all fell apart. We polished some dialogue and edited some, and Mel Gibson made some great suggestions that we kept. He brought a lot of research to it, an expert on police strategies and surveillance and other technical people. Then there was Michael Bay [*Armageddon*, *The Rock*], who was up to direct the picture at one time, and he suggested we add a little twist to the ending. He didn't have any specifics, but I thought it was a good idea and came up with something.



Larry Cohen

Tell me about your first story meeting with Michael Bay, I understand it was interesting.
He came in and sat down and said, "How do we get this out of the fucking phone booth?" [laughs] And I said, "Well there's no movie if you take it out of the phone booth." That's like taking Jimmy Stewart out of the apartment in *Rear Window*. You could have certainly turned that into a conventional type of story, but then it would have lost the beauty of the picture. With *Phone Booth* you have even more chances for visuals. He's out in the street on a corner of one of the busiest intersections in Manhattan. With swarms of people, police officers, cars, and a lot more going on around him than Jimmy Stewart did. I told him this, but he just couldn't see it. He wanted to follow the swat team as they climb up the walls and over the rooftops. I said, "Michael you've done all that in *The Rock*,

you might as well just get stock footage. Why do you just want to do the same thing all over again?" Well, he was going to replace me anyway, he was already talking with another writer, but fortunately the Fox executives ended up seeing it my way. He was going to bring someone in for a million dollars to rewrite the whole script, which would have been an unneeded expenditure. But sometimes that's the way it works. You get a hot director who brings in a hot writer and thinks he'll make the picture better, ignoring that there was something there to begin with that propelled all these people to believe in the script and buy it in the first place. The strangest thing is when the people who buy something suddenly forget this.

I read that you had lunch a few times with Hitchcock and told him about your idea for *Phone Booth*.
One day at Universal we had a nice three hour lunch during which we were talking about ideas for movies, and I said "How about one that all takes place in phone booth." I recalled he had a phone booth scene in *The Birds*. He took to that idea, but neither he nor I knew how to make it work. When I ran into him again at a party after the screening of *Frenzy*, and he said to me, "How are you doing on our phone booth story?" I told him, as soon as I licked it I'd let him know. Of course, I was never able to while he was alive. It came to me years later, how to make it work. How to kept someone in a booth for the entire movie? The answer was the sniper. Then everything fell into place. Once I had the sniper, I had to have all these other steps to keep him in the booth. The sniper has to kill someone who's trying to drag our hero out of the booth, people have to think he did it. The police will come and think he has a gun. He'll refuse to come out of the booth because he'll know he'll die. The sniper will threaten to kill the detective, and the hero is then protecting the detective's life. Then the girlfriend and wife show up, and now they're in jeopardy. And then a gun turns up hidden in the phone booth. So, twist after twist to keep the thing going. Once I had the basic concept of the sniper talking to the hero the whole time he's in the booth, everything else fell into place.

I also heard that years later Hitchcock's daughter commented to you about the story.
She was making a speech at the Director's Guild and I happened to be in attendence when she started to mention all the ideas her father wanted to make, and she said "Would you believe he always wanted to do a movie that all took place in a telephone booth." So I knew he never forgot the idea. When I ran into Spielberg at the Oscars he told me, "If Hitchcock were alive he'd want to direct *Phone Booth*." That brought it full circle. That's the best compliment I could possibly get. No matter what the critics say, that will be the best compliment on the script I can get from anybody.

Do you think you'll regret not directing *Phone Booth* yourself, as a Cohen quickie?
I already regret it. But it was a great opportunity for me as a writer. When I went on set my wife told me I kept making faces during filming, so I didn't stay long. That would bother me if I was the director. I took some notes and gave them to Joel [Schumacher] who graciously accepted them. So I did have some input. But at one time when I wrote the script, I really felt the character [Stu] was an outgrowth of the character Tony Curtis played in *The Sweet Smell of Success*. Do you remember that one?

Absolutely. Great dialogue, Curtis was phenomenal, and it was a great script by Ernest Lehman and Clifford Odets.
Yeah. It was Tony Curtis' best performance. I had lunch with Tony Curtis after he read the script and he was all excited. His career was pretty much over at that point. I told him it was the same character he played twenty-five years ago. He told me it would be a great opportunity. So for a while I flirted with the idea of making the picture myself with Tony. I thought maybe I could get him in shape and make him look a little younger, but it wasn't meant to be. *

Harry Caul is a staff writer for *Screenwriters Monthly* and can be reached at: harry_caul@iscriptdb.com

Script Sampling: PHONE BOOTH

Screenplay by: Larry Cohen

From page 38:

The tiny red laser dot dances around Stu's chest and stomach -- then jumps up and remains between his eyes.

VOICE
This takes all the guesswork out of it. You know exactly where to expect it before I even tighten my finger on the trigger.

STU
Don't tighten. Don't even tickle that fucking trigger.

VOICE
How about Geraldo? He'd run his ass off to get in on this.

STU
You're talking about the old Geraldo. Look, I can try and reach cable NBC. They're hungry.

VOICE
I'm dissappointed. I wanted to go first class.

STU
They do a great job. They'll haul a whole crew over to cover your surrender "live."

VOICE
I never expressed interest in giving myself up. There are so many other phone booths in the city. I'm just getting warmed up.