

Q&A with “Raising Flag” director NEAL MILLER

Please see Biography for Neal Miller as a reference to this discussion.

Why an engineering degree? You seem too artistic for that field.

MILLER: It wasn't my first choice. I was actually registered in architecture at the University of Illinois, but a student counselor discouraged me from going into that program because I wasn't a good artist – which was total nonsense. It seemed like whenever I showed some interest in an artistic pursuit I was discouraged from doing it. So I ended up in engineering, primarily because I've always liked working with my hands, and I have good technical skills.

Would you have headed into theater, given the choice?

MILLER: My freshman year I took a job on campus working on the construction of sets for student productions and I got very interested in set design. But people kept telling me I couldn't do that in the Midwest. I had to go to New York or L.A., and it was a union thing and hard to break into, blah, blah, blah. I was just so confused at the time that I gave up the whole idea.

What was your involvement with New Century Management?

MILLER: I was managing a venture capital fund at the time, and although I loved what I was doing, I realized it wasn't really going to lead to anything for me personally. I decided I needed to build an asset base for myself, so I wouldn't be beholden to a big corporation for a job later in life. Several guys I knew in Chicago had done very well renovating Victorian apartment buildings, and I decided that was a good route for me to pursue. It satisfied my need to work with my hands, and I've always been interested in buildings. So I connected with some real estate brokers who were interested in financing the operation, and I became the sweat equity partner because I had no money.

Does the company still exist?

MILLER: Yes, we still own several of the buildings we renovated back in the 70's. It basically provided the asset base I was looking for, and it continues to allow me to do what I want in film without being dependent on film for my income.

What motivated you to go in that direction?

MILLER: My dad and his brother owned a junk business they inherited from their father. After WWII that business went to hell. I saw them struggle for years to keep it going, but eventually they had to close it down. My dad ended up working for other people, and I saw how difficult that was for him because he was basically an entrepreneur. Then I remember when I was working at Brunswick Corporation, an older systems analyst was always sweating it out, concerned about keeping his job, and I just decided I didn't want to live my life that way.

How did you get into film?

MILLER: When I was managing the venture capital fundm I met Bob Greenberg, an executive with a commercial finance company. My "money" partners in the renovation business were having financial problems, and I was looking for some financing help to save the buildings. Greenberg had provided completion financing for several of Joseph Levine's films: "The Producers," "Lion in Winter," "The Graduate." He had started his own independent film financing company by then. We had lunch, but instead of talking about real estate we talked about film the whole time. We became friends, and whenever I went to his office I'd grab a couple of screenplays from the stacks piled everywhere. Like everybody else in the world, I said, "Hey, I can write better than this." Bob and I eventually put a small fund together to develop screenplays, and I started doing some writing. I just fell in love with the whole process of making a film. By then, my wife and partner, Nancy, had finished the renovation work on the buildings and had managed to buy out our "money" partners, most of whom had gone bankrupt because of huge bank

loans. Nancy agreed to manage the properties so I could make a film, and that’s the way I got started.

Your first film was a short subject called “The Temptation of Charles C. Charlie.” How did you end up casting Darryl Hannah in it?

MILLER: We were having a very hard time finding an attractive, sexy teenager for the lead. The cinematographer finally said, “I just shot a short film for a family about their daughter with horses, and she might be really great for this.” It turned out she lived just a few blocks from my office. The minute she walked in, I knew she was perfect for the part. That was, of course, Darryl.

What happened to that film?

MILLER: I was just learning as I was going, so I hired a guy to write and direct it. He had done some documentaries for the BBC and was teaching at the film school at Columbia College. It was a bad choice, but I didn’t have a good sense of the difference between documentary and dramatic films. He messed the film up terribly. I found a really good editor to see if we could salvage the project, and I sat with him for several weeks as he re-edited the footage. I learned more about filmmaking doing that than I did from shooting the film. He got a fairly decent film out of it, but it wasn’t at the level I was really shooting for. I also discovered that a half hour format is not very marketable. I think we eventually made one sale to Japan.

What happened next?

MILLER: I had written a 60-page treatment of a film idea called “The Tap,” and I sent it to some people I had met in L.A. It did the rounds and never got anywhere. Three years later it came out as “WarGames.” It was almost exactly the same story. That’s when I realized I wasn’t going to get anywhere trying to deal with Hollywood. And I also pretty much ruled out commercial television.

How did you get tied into PBS?

MILLER: I figured that since I wanted to make high quality films, PBS was the place for me. Bob Geller had just completed a PBS series called "The American Short Story," based on classical stories by great writers, all of them dead. I decided to try to do a similar series based on short stories written by contemporary American writers.

I met with Thea Flaum, a producer at the PBS station in Chicago. She was producing "Sneak Previews" (with Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel) and "American Bandstand" at that time. Thea liked the idea of the series and recommended I use humorous short stories. She urged the president of the station to co-produce the series - she was convinced I was going to get it done with or without them, and they may as well be involved. The president declined because he felt I would be competing with the station for the same money.

Thea, who is a close friend to this day, was angry. She put me in touch with Sue Wyle, the head of PBS in D.C. Sue looked at my little half-hour pilot (with Darryl Hannah) and agreed it wasn't up to snuff, but she suggested I submit my series idea, which I was calling "Sense of Humor," to the PBS Market. PBS had a market at that time where you would submit series proposals to all the station program managers for funding. All PBS series were funded that way, including everything from "Sesame Street" to "MacNeil-Lehrer," and 99% of the programs were submitted by stations. Very few independent producers were involved in the process. There were about 360 proposals that year; they picked the top 60, and my proposal was number 59 – so we made the cut.

Nancy and I went to San Francisco to pitch the series idea to the 270 program managers. Naturally, they asked, "What have you done before? What have you got to show us?" "Well, I made a half hour film, but it's not at the quality level I envision for this series, so I'm not going to show it," I said. Ultimately they said, "It's a good idea, but we don't fund pilots. Thanks, but no thanks."

How did you finally get your foot in the door?

MILLER: I went back to Chicago, and I purchased an option on a story I liked, “Come Along With Me,” based on an unfinished novel Shirley Jackson was writing when she died. I learned that Joanne Woodward had directed a couple of films – one for the AFI and an episode for a series – so for some reason I submitted it to her agent. She got back to me very quickly and said Joanne was interested. I had a half-hour screenplay written by a Chicago writer, but when it was going to be a full hour I started writing on it myself. I went to Joanne and Paul’s home in Connecticut, and the three of us worked on the script together.

How did you get “Come Along With Me” made, since you still didn’t have a deal with PBS?

MILLER: Joanne cast Estelle Parsons, Barbara Baxley and Sylvia Sydney, and I put together the best production crew that I could hire in Chicago. But I didn’t have enough money to produce the film, and I couldn’t raise any money. I sold one of the renovated apartment buildings we owned, and I borrowed some money. That gave us enough for two weeks of the three week production schedule. Then the production manager pointed out that we paid invoices 10 days after they are submitted, so by the time the third week’s invoices were due, principal photography would be completed. I figured by then I’d have something to show investors, and I could raise more money. So I went for it. Unfortunately, we ran out of money the first week.

What was your budget?

MILLER: I think around \$325,000.

Why did you run out of money?

MILLER: The production manager, who was also the first A.D., wasn’t very together. Remember, I’m learning as I’m going here. So I called everybody together, including Joanne, and I explained the situation. I was going to sell some stock I owned, and my accountant had arranged for some potential investors to see some of the dailies.

Everybody agreed to continue working. I sold the stock and four investors put up some money. The rest I borrowed.

So how did you get it on PBS?

MILLER: I resubmitted my proposal for the "Sense of Humor" series to the PBS Market, telling them that I now had some footage to show. This time we moved up to #37 out of 60. I hired an editor who cut commercials, and he put together a 10-minute sampler from the work print.

We went to New Orleans and pitched the series again and showed the 10 minute sampler. The program managers loved it. We'd have maybe 40 or 50 program managers in the screening room at a time – and they'd actually applaud at the end of the sampler.

But that was the first year the "American Playhouse" series came in for funding, and they were owned by the PBS affiliates in New York, Boston, L.A., and the South Carolina Educational Network – the powerhouses of American drama production. Everybody told me, "There's no way you're going to compete with those guys. There's only so much drama money and they're going to get it all."

But then an interesting thing began happening. The program managers started pushing for "American Playhouse" to take "Sense of Humor" in as a miniseries. Dave Davis, the head of "American Playhouse," rejected the idea. The more presentations I made, the more this rumbling started developing among the program managers, putting pressure on "American Playhouse" to take our series. Nancy and I were just sitting on the sidelines watching this whole thing develop like a TV series. We just couldn't believe what was going on around us.

So it came down to the final day of the Market, and Sue Wyle came to me and said, "I just told Dave Davis that if he doesn't include your series in 'American Playhouse,' I don't care if the program managers fund his series, I'm not going to give him the money." I was dumbfounded.

At the final luncheon Sue summarized the whole market, and the last thing she said was, "It's the general conclusion of the program managers that 'American Playhouse' should include 'Sense of Humor' as a miniseries." Dave Davis stood up and said, "I've already called a meeting of the Board of Directors and it'll be done." Nancy and I didn't need an airplane to fly home.

I ended up with a three-film deal, and an option for three more. Along with "Come Along With Me," we made Kurt Vonnegut's "Who Am I This Time?" with Susan Sarandon and Christopher Walken, and Ray Bradbury's "Any Friend of Nicholas Nickleby is a Friend of Mine" with Fred Gwynne. I ended up producing six films for Playhouse, more by far than anyone else ever did.

What were the budgets?

MILLER: Again, in the same range. Between \$300,000 and \$400,000 each.

Did you ever make your money back on "Come Along With Me?"

MILLER: Eventually. But I'll tell you, Nancy and I were up to our ears in debt, and if we hadn't made that deal with Playhouse, we would have been bankrupt.

How did you get Susan Sarandon and Christopher Walken for "Who Am I?"

MILLER: I had Susan in mind when I was writing the screenplay – I kept hearing her voice when I wrote the dialogue. She was the only actress I sent the script to. Susan later told me that she was moving and was about to leave for Greece to shoot a film with Paul Mazursky, and she said to herself, "Please don't have me like this script." But she loved it and couldn't resist it. I gave her the names of three actors I was considering for the male lead and she picked Chris Walken.

So we're in pre-production and everything is going smoothly. I had scouted the locations and the director, Noah Black, was flying in from L.A. on a Monday for two weeks of

prep. I called him on Friday to confirm his arrival, and he told me he wasn't coming. "We don't have a contract," he said. "I've got a Movie of the Week for CBS and I'm going to do that." I said, "You know as well as I do that nobody signs contracts before they begin production. That's not the way it's done. You made a commitment to do this." He said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not coming."

I was in a panic. I called a friend who headed ABC Drama, Chad Hoffman, and explained the situation. Chad said, "From what you're describing about the storyline, what about Jonathan Demme?" I said, "Well, obviously he'd be incredible, but how am I going to get to Jonathan Demme?" He said, "I'll call you back." He called back 10 minutes later and said that Sue Mengers, Demme's agent, was flying to New York over the weekend. If I could get the script to him by the next morning, she'd get it to Jonathan. I sent the script by courier, and Monday morning I got a call from Jonathan. He liked the script and was interested, but he wanted to see what I had done. He flew to Chicago on Wednesday. I showed him "Come Along With Me" and told him I would get the same crew. We had a deal memo signed by Friday, delayed production one week, and shot the film in 12 days. It all came together like magic.

What happened after the first three films aired on PBS?

MILLER: They picked up the option to do another film the next year, and that was "A Matter of Principle" with Alan Arkin and Barbara Dana – the predecessor to "Raising Flagg." Then came "The Roommate."

What was Virginia Madsen doing at this point?

MILLER: She had not done a thing, but I pushed hard to get her for that part in "A Matter of Principle," because I thought she was the best of what we had seen in Chicago. And Virginia went right to Hollywood from there.

You passed on Tom Cruise for that film?

MILLER: No, that was on "The Roommate." I had cast Barry Miller for the part of Hub, but we were having a hell of a time finding the co-star for the part of Orson. Bonnie Timmerman, my casting director in New York, called me and said, "There's this film opening in Chicago called "Risky Business" with this young actor who's really hot. He likes the script and he's in Chicago doing a publicity gig, so you should meet with him."

So I met Tom Cruise at a downtown hotel. He loved the script, and he wanted to play Hub, the more offbeat character, instead of the Orson role I wanted to cast him in. So like a fool I said, "I'm sorry, I've already given that to somebody." And, you know, I was perfectly able to make the change at that time, but I didn't do it. So yes, I passed on Tom Cruise, and it may have been one of the bigger screw-ups I've made in the business, but then you never know how these things would have worked out anyway, so I forgive myself.

"The Roommate" got into the Sundance Festival?

MILLER: Redford had just taken over the US Film Festival in Park City, which was going under, and we were invited to show "The Roommate." Toward the end of the festival, I was told we were the odds-on favorite to win, but "Blood Simple" ended up taking it. Soon after that, the film won the Grand Prix at the L.A. International Film Festival, and it got special awards at several other festivals.

The next film you did was "Under the Biltmore Clock" with Sean Young. How did that come about?

MILLER: The Pew Charitable Trust was holding a national competition to fund a film for Playhouse. I submitted the five films I had made and the names of several short stories I had optioned. I received a \$400,000 grant and selected the F. Scott Fitzgerald story, "Myra Meets His Family." Because it was a heavy period piece, we needed more money and Playhouse came up with the rest. We changed the title to "Under the

Biltmore Clock” after the film was done. It was my first full directing job and my last production for PBS.

How much longer did “American Playhouse” go on?

MILLER: Just a few more years. They started running low on funds and doing a lot of videotaped stage productions and very low budget programming. They eventually shut down, which was a real shame. It was the last vestige of high quality drama in the US and rivaled the BBC’s drama series “Masterpiece Theater.”

How did you get a deal with Disney for “Bicentennial Man”?

MILLER: I had optioned the story from Isaac Asimov and was working on a script. It took longer than I expected, but Isaac was very gracious and kept letting me extend the option. It was expensive for me, as an individual, but I kept working on it. Carter DeHaven (“Hoosiers”) optioned the property from me and took it to Jeffrey Katzenberg at Disney, but he passed on it.

When Carter’s option lapsed, a friend of mine from Chicago, who was working at Disney, took it back to Disney and sold it on the basis of a half page pitch. He showed me his pitch notes and I was astonished. Basically, he pitched it as a story of a robot that becomes a nanny to a young girl – it’s “Driving Miss Daisy” meets “Short Circuit,” he told them – and they bought it and put it on the fast track. So much for learning how to pitch projects.

I was a co-producer and had consultation rights in the development of the screenplay. David Vogel, president of Walt Disney Pictures, made it clear that although they purchased my screenplay, they intended to hire a “big name” writer to rewrite the script. Then Roger Birnbaum, the main producer on the project at the time, told me what has become my favorite Hollywood quote: “We love this story, but your script is too close to the story.” To me, it represents what Hollywood is all about – the integrity of original material means nothing to most of them.

That’s when my nightmare with Disney began – I experienced what I had always heard described as development hell. Disney ignored my consultation rights, and it was business as usual for them, which means they do what they want.

The Bicentennial Man is a classic science fiction story about a very unique robot who tries to become human over a 200 year period. He is ultimately told that the World Court would never declare him human, because although they could accept an immortal machine they could never accept an immortal human being. So without telling anybody, the robot has this special operation that allows his power supply to drain – so he can die in order to prove that he’s human. David Vogel says to me, “We can’t have the robot die in the end. Nobody wants that.” And I said, “David, that’s the story! It’s an allegory about what it means to be human!” He just didn’t get it.

How many screenwriters were on “Bicentennial Man”?

MILLER: In the seven years of development, they went through three or four writers (I forget) and they got nowhere. I’d go down to Burbank and take a meeting with the supervising executive and a writer they’d selected without my knowledge. They’d pretty much ignore what I had to say and go off in some direction or another, and end up with nothing. David Vogel finally asked me to write a treatment of what I thought should be done. I wrote a four page plot summary and ended it with a list of successful Disney films in which the principal character dies in the end – films like “Old Yeller.” David said, “Okay, we’re going to do it your way, and I even agree that the robot is going to die.”

After that they hired another writer, and I went down for another meeting. The writer described her idea for the story, and it was like the robot has an accident and a clear fluid drains from a cut on his arm, and then later in the story the robot has another accident and blood comes out of his arm. No explanation of why this happened, just this miraculous transformation. I told Nancy, “She’s doing a remake of Pinocchio.” I mean, it was ludicrous. I told the executive that I had an agreement with David [Vogel] about the way

the story was going to be done, and she told me that she believed the writer should have the right to explore her own ideas. And so I said, "Look, call me when the film's done. I'm out of here."

They ended up getting nothing from that writer, and eventually they hired Nick Kazan to write the screenplay. I was excited when Wolfgang Peterson was hired to direct because he is a realistic filmmaker, which is the way I always saw the story. Then Wolfgang pulled out of the project – I never got a clear explanation as to why, but I believe it was because of "creative differences" with Disney. Anyway, they ended up hiring Chris Columbus. My heart sank, because I didn't think this was his kind of story. My opinion was reinforced when I saw the first dailies. They had Robin Williams dressed up in this Tin Man outfit. What should have been a classic science fiction film on the order of "2001" and "Blade Runner" was butchered into a silly movie that Disney lost a lot of money on.

For an engineer, you sure seem to know your literature. Were you always a reader?

MILLER: As an engineer I wasn't into literature at all, but when I decided to go into film I quickly recognized that the key was good screenplays. As a beginner it was going to be hard enough making a good film without also struggling to create good storylines and good characters. So I started reading all the short story anthologies I could get my hands on, because short stories are like treatments for a screenplay. Ultimately that's what attracted the talent to the films I did for Playhouse, and one of the reasons they were successful. That, and maintaining the integrity of the original stories.

When did you move to Oregon and why Eugene?

MILLER: In 1988. When I met Nancy, she made it clear that she didn't want to live in Chicago long term, so I promised her we'd move within five years. Fifteen years later, we finally got around to leaving. Then it became a matter of where did we want to live. We saw an article in *Outdoor* magazine on "The 100 Most Beautiful Counties in the Country," and it included Lane County, Oregon. We considered a number of factors that

were important to us, and Eugene was always in the top five. So we took a raft trip down the Rogue River and then went to Eugene, and it just felt right. It fulfilled one of our major goals: to live in a rural setting and be within twenty or so minutes of a cultural center. Then it took us about two years to find the right property, and we've been here ever since.

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