ONE

TO BE, OR NOT TO BE

"Okay, here's the deal! You become our producer, or we'll kill you!"

The year was 1963. Stage #32, Universal Studios. R.G. (Bud) Springsteen was directing an episode of *The Virginian*, the first ninety-minute series on TV. It was nine o'clock in the morning, and I felt distinctly out of place on the western set wearing a dark blue pin-striped suit, a white shirt, and a striped tie. There was a strict dress code at Universal in those days, and a white shirt was mandatory. Rumor had it that the big boss, Lew Wasserman, had summarily fired an employee

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who had been caught in a pink shirt. I'm not sure why, except that pink was synonymous with Communism at that time.

It was the second day of shooting of the first TV episode I had ever produced in my life. And it wasn't going well at all. James Drury, who portrayed "The Virginian," was giving the director a hard time. I was standing a discreet five feet away, listening to the argument and watching the minutes tick by while Springsteen tried to disengage himself from a nonsensical dialogue about motivations.

James Drury was "The Virginian." 1960s promotions photo (Universal Studios/NBC-TV Network).

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My forehead was fixed in the frown that is characteristic of my appearance when I am concentrating. I have discovered through the years that a lot of my co-workers are afraid of me. They mistake the frown for disapproval. On this day, however, there wasn't a soul on the stage that was afraid of Cy Chermak. And there was no reason why they should be. I hardly knew which end was up. To make my situation worse, I had recently gone from three and a half packs of cigarettes a day to zilch, because my youngest daughter Bonnie Jo had convinced herself that I would drop dead on the spot if I ever put the filthy weed to my mouth again.

The argument was heating up now, and the crew was becoming embarrassed by the public display of temperament. The assistant director had telephoned the unit production manager, whose job it is to watch the costs incurred during the production period, and he was standing beside the camera nervously chewing on his cigar. The unit manager was going to have to report the resolution of this confrontation to his immediate superior, the studio production head, and since he hated to report bad news he was silently imploring me to do something. In fact, everyone on the stage was waiting for me to do something.

Finally, no avenue of escape available to me, I moved toward the combatants, already having decided to ask Drury

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if he would table the subject until lunch so we could discuss it on less expensive time. I arrived at their side just as the director decided he was tired of kid games.

"Jim," he said, "you do it that way because I said to do it that way. That's why!"

There was a moment of silence, and then Drury turned to me. "Are you going to let him get away with that?" he demanded.

I could feel every eye on the stage turn to me. Choreography by Busby Berkley. Big close-up on the new kid. Welcome to Show Biz, Sonny.

Now, Springsteen was a director to whom I owed no particular allegiance, but he was entitled to some respect because he was a man in his late sixties, and he had directed about a thousand motion pictures, some of which were pretty good.

He had been hired by the Executive Producer, who thought he would provide a perfect counterbalance to a green producer, me, who had to be pointed toward the toilet when he needed to go. I had only known him for a week and a half and he hadn't been very nice to me.

Drury, on the other hand, played the title role in our series. We had worked together for about a year, while I was functioning as the story editor on the show, and we got along

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pretty well. I think he was counting on me for support, and I really wanted to give it, but I felt he was dead wrong in the argument and that he was wasting precious time. Time for which the director would be held accountable, time that I would have to find a way to make up, and time that the unit manager was keeping track of as if it was his own life's blood.

Right or wrong, as I look at the words on paper, it appears to me that my choice should have been clear. Any idiot with even the slightest instincts for survival should have understood that if the series was a major hit, the star would be with us for a long time. On the other hand, Springsteen might never direct another episode.

And yet, some kind of inner energy flashed a signal to my early warning system. The alarm sounded. The sign lit up. I felt we were on the brink of anarchy, and an eerie sense of prophecy shouted to me that if I wasn't careful, this scene could be replayed for me by every actor in the company on every day for the rest of my life as a producer ... if I had any. If battle lines needed to be drawn, this might as well be the place. If the inmates were going to take over the institution, they would have to do so by force. I wasn't going to turn over the controls willingly.

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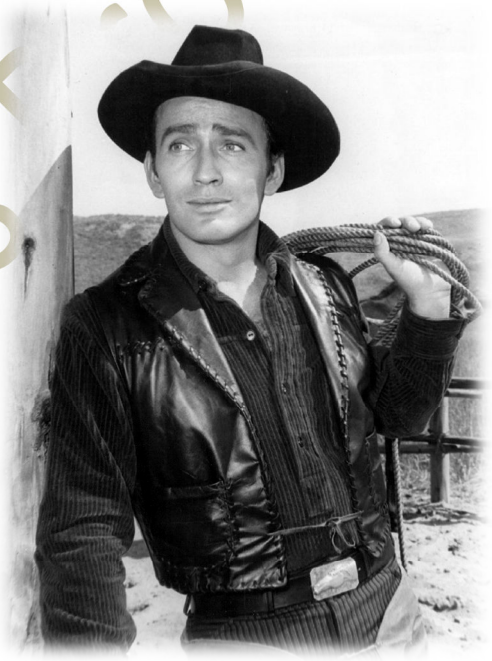
"He's the director, Jim." I tried for a tone of voice that was firm, but not arrogant. "Let's try it his way."

There was a sudden buzzing of muted voices from the listening crewmembers. In sound effect parlance, we call it a "Walla."

I knew that their reaction wasn't going to help matters much.

Drury stared at me coldly. "I'm leaving," he said somberly in his best "I am the Virginian" stage voice. It made him sound as if he was speaking from the depths of a mine shaft.



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"When *he's* no longer the director*, maybe* I'll be back."

And he turned and walked off the set. Walked off! On the second day of shooting of my first episode.

I was dumbstruck, rooted to the floor – unable to think. The first assistant director came over to me and before he could ask me what my battle plan was, I snatched the lighted cigarette from his hand and tried to tranquilize myself with nicotine. And as I stood there, puffing up a little grey cloud of smoke around my head, an actress by the name of Lisabeth Hush sneaked up behind me and whispered in my ear.

"No one forced you to become a producer," she said. And then she glided away.

At that exact moment in time, I didn't have the maturity to see the humor in the remark. But I've thought about it through the years. And I know that she was right. No one did force me to become a producer, but it wasn't a conscious choice, either. It sort of evolved. And standing in the middle of stage 32 of Universal Studios, it appeared to me as if the evolution was about to come to an abrupt halt. My second day as a producer was liable to be my last.

I made hurried plans with the director to shoot a few small scenes without Drury, and then walked "the last mile" to the Executive Producer's office. Frank Price was on the telephone, and though his secretary buzzed through when I

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explained to her that we were in crisis, he made a few more calls before asking to have me sent in.

As I crossed the twenty-five feet from the door to his desk I noticed that Frank appeared to be relaxed and in good spirits.

"What's happening?" he inquired innocently.

My voice was quavering as I told him that we would very shortly be shut down because Drury had walked and we didn't have a lot of work to shoot without him.

I ran down the entire affair, and every once in a while he nodded, and a few times he said, "Hmmm ..." We were interrupted by one brief incoming call. After about ten minutes I had said it all, and there was silence in the room. We stared at each other. Then he smiled.

"So what are you going to do?" he asked.

I admitted that I didn't know. I had figured that the first order of business was to let the Executive Producer know what had happened. I was hoping that he would give me some advice.

"Why don't you go have a talk with Jim," was his only counsel.

I felt too stupid to live, let alone produce a 90-minute television show. I shouldn't have needed the boss to tell me that.

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"What do I say to him?"

"Whatever it takes," he answered without hesitation. I sighed, wondering if I should admit that I didn't think I was the kind of person who could do that, but I decided to avoid another confrontation. "I'll go over to his dressing room."

"You won't find him there," Frank told me. He looked at his watch. "He's on Stage 32, working. Has been for the last fifteen minutes."

Then he told me that he had been informed of the incident as it was happening. He had the guard at the main gate intercept Drury as he was driving off the lot, and had convinced the actor to go back to work over the telephone.

"How did you do it?" I hoped I wasn't begging. "What did you say?"

Frank smiled. "Hmmm," he answered. "Gotta make a call."

Since I hadn't actually been dismissed, I waited uncomfortably through ten minutes of his phone call, and when he waved bye-bye to me, I waved back, and left.

On Stage 32, it was as if the incident had never taken place, as if it had been created by Rod Serling out of *The Twilight Zone*.

Actor and director were working together as if they were dear friends and they happily showed me the compromise

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they had devised for the scene. Drury and I never discussed the incident further. Never, ever. I tried valiantly to extract Price's secret from him, but every time I asked him how he had gotten Drury back to work, he gave me the same answer, "Hmmm." Finally, I gave up trying.

Today the story reads like just another bit of show business trivia, but it was my baptism of fire, and I've never forgotten the truths that emerged that day:

1. I would never be the kind of person who would be able to do or say "whatever it takes."

2. No one ever forced me to become a producer.

No one will ever put a gun to your head either.

And if the past is truly prologue, then all that has proceeded is simply by way of introduction.

For the record, I stopped smoking again a few weeks later and I haven't touched tobacco since. I worked *The Virginian*, off and on, for almost five years. In all that time, James Drury and I never said another angry word to each other. I was right about the prophetic aspects of our only dispute, however. I have played the scene many times throughout the years with many stars, over many directors. They didn't always end as well.

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