

APERTURE



THE PHOTOGRAPHIC BOOKS OF JEFF BRIDGES

BY
RICHARD
MISRACH

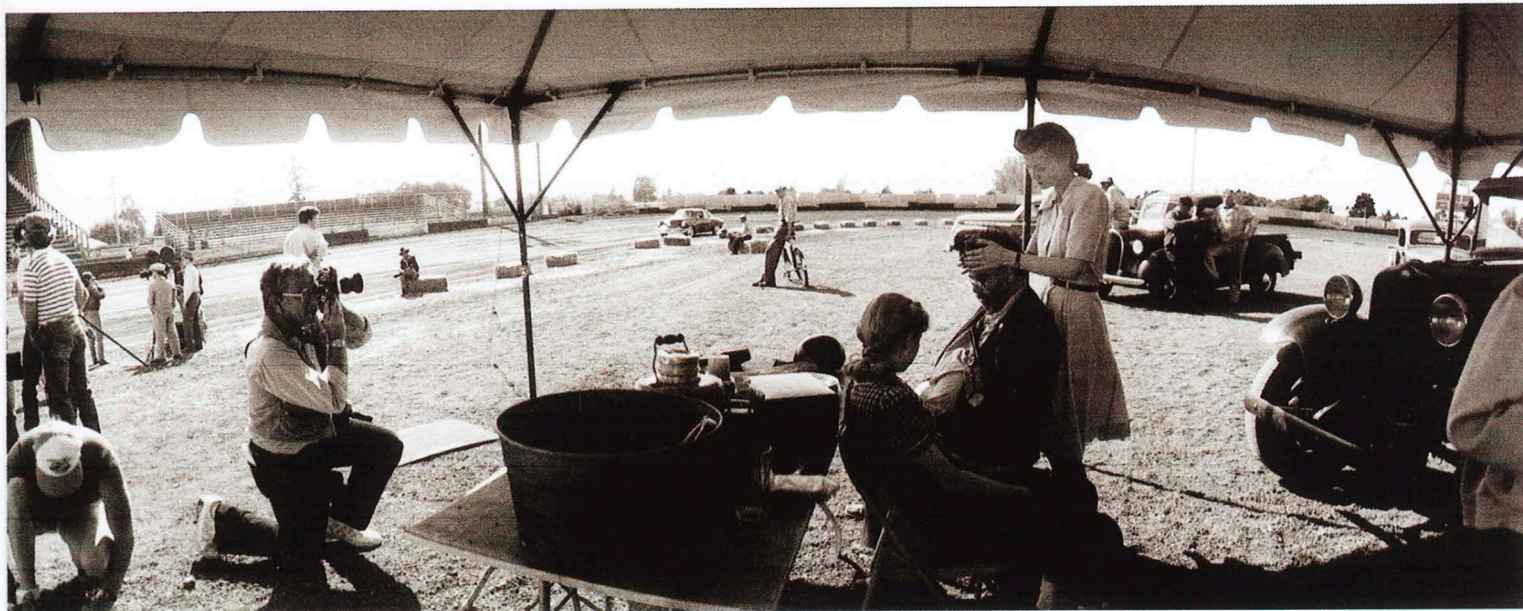
Sometimes it's frustrating: it's like trying to serve two masters. I've got my camera and I really do care about the images that I make, but I'm getting paid and my heart is mainly in trying to do this character. It can be really frustrating....



Jeff and I go way back. It must have been the summer of 1961 when I was twelve. I caught my first wave on a board at his dad's beach house in Malibu. In high school, Jeff and I belonged to a club called the Gents: our objectives were to be popular, have parties, and not get hurt too badly by the Windsors, our arch-rival club comprised mostly of jocks and

thugs. Jeff's dad, Lloyd Bridges, had a big impact on me, not because he was a movie star, but in spite of that fact: he was a really nice guy—unpretentious and down-to-earth. In fact, it was with his urging and guidance that the Gents accomplished the one unselfish act of our high-school career: to gather food and clothing for a needy family at Christmas.

While I did not have a single art bone in my body back then, Jeff was always drawn to the arts. I remember being impressed by a Joseph Cornell-like box he made that was hanging on the wall of the beach house, and by a fancy gold-



Joan Allen soothes Francis Ford Coppola while shooting Tucker



Explosion of Tommy Lee's hide-a-way Blown Away • Robin entertaining us on Fiske King



afed Salvador Dalí monograph he got for Christmas. Jeff was multi-talented: he painted, photographed, and played music. He also acted, but we all knew that he showed little promise there. He was going to end up a visual artist or musician. Over the years, Jeff and I have maintained contact, mostly through mutual high-school friends. I heard that he had undertaken an unusual photographic project that caught my interest. While on the set of his movies, Jeff takes photographs behind the scenes—the actors, crew, and sets. After completion of the film he edits the images into a book and gives copies to everyone involved. The books are not intended for public consumption. After the first two films, Jeff standardized the books into the same format, approximately nine inches high and twelve inches wide. To date, he has made books for the following films: *Starman* (which he titled *They Came from Hollywood*), 1984; *Tucker*, 1988; *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, 1989; *Nashville*, 1989; *The Fisher King*, 1990; *American Heart*, 1991; *Fearless*, 1992; *Runaway Train*, 1993; *Wild Bill*, 1994; *White House Down*, 1995; *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, 1996; *The Big Lebowski*, 1997; and *Arlington Road*, 1998.

Several years ago, Jeff sent me copies of some of the books. I found them fascinating and felt they warranted wider exposure. Earlier this year I interviewed Jeff about his photographic book projects.

CHARD MISRACH Can you remember when your interest in photography first developed?

JEFF BRIDGES I started in high school with my father's Nikon. We set up a little darkroom in the basement of an apartment house he owned on Wilshire. Later on, when I met my wife, about twenty-five years ago, she was searching for direction, and I kind

of turned her on to photography. She was a professional photographer for a while. We built a darkroom in our house in Malibu, and I ended up spending quite a bit of time there.

R.M. When did you start taking pictures seriously?

J.B. The big turning point happened when I did the movie *King Kong*—I think it was the mid-'70s. I played a photographer—a scientist who was taking photographs and always had a camera on—it was a Nikon with a motor drive. What I tend to do when I'm working on movies is try to do what the characters do, so I found myself taking a lot of photographs. I enjoyed that, you know, and getting those prints back. One of the things I love about photography is that you take these pictures, you kind of forget exactly what you shot. Sometimes it would be a couple of years before I got around to developing the negatives. I'd unroll the wet film from its spool, and it would all come back to me, just a flood of memories. It was so exciting. Or watching the print come up in the developer. The magic. Or later on, even after I stopped processing the film and prints myself—you send them out, they get developed, they come back and it's that feeling of Christmas: you open your present to yourself, and sometimes you get really wonderfully surprised. I gave some of those photographs to the people I worked with on the films—they kind of liked them.

R.M. Did you do a book on *King Kong*?

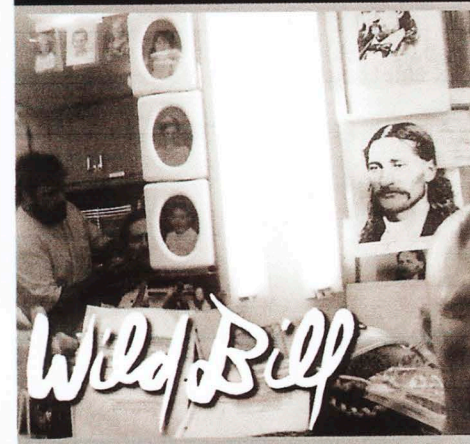
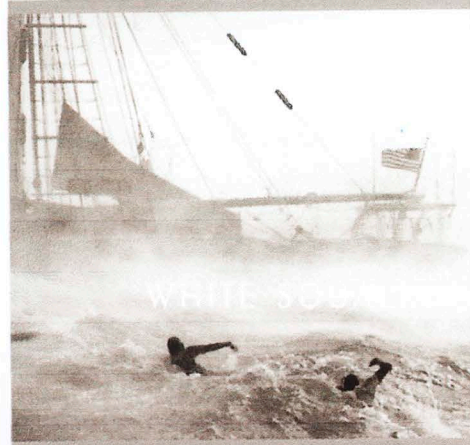
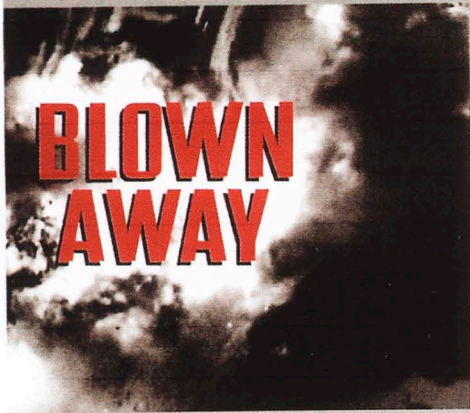
J.B. No, that was before any of the books.

R.M. It's the books in particular that I find so interesting. How did those come about?

J.B. During the filming of *Starman*, Karen Allen, who was in the picture, liked a lot of what I was shooting, and she said, "Why don't we make a gift to the cast and crew of these photographs and we'll also include some of [still photographer] Sid Baldwin's work." Charlie Martin Smith (another actor in the film), Karen, and I produced that book.

R.M. Since then you've done one for most of your films. It's hard for me to imagine, with the demands of your career, that you've been able to sustain your photographic projects all these years. It's a huge commitment.

J.B. Sometimes it's frustrating: it's like trying to serve two masters. I've got my camera and I really do care about the images that I make, but I'm getting paid and my heart is mainly in trying to do this character. It can be really frustrating—you'll see a great photo opportunity and you just say, "I can't do it." Actually, most of the work on the books comes in the editing process, after the movie's over. I have to go through all of those photographs and put them into this thing and it's a lot of work.



Jeff Bridges, Five book covers.



R.M. Any particular reason why you didn't make books out of certain films?

J.B. Earlier in my career, after I'd do a movie, I'd think, "I never want to do that ever again in my life." Making movies uses a weird, emotional kind of muscle that's, for one thing, a sham. You're pretending. So you say, "I'm just tired of pretending, I want to lead a real life and do other art and get into other things." But after a while, that feeling wanes and you get kind of horny to make a movie again. Usually, what happens after the movie is that I just collapse and it's tough for me to get right back into the work of making the books, getting through those photographs and reliving all of that. Once I had some tension with the director at the end, and I couldn't go back in and make a book. I was just too emotionally drained. I mean, I work in a very collaborative way. It's strange, but the actor actually empowers the director—that's part of my creative process—I like that. I like working with people, I like bouncing off that. And then, I tip my hat to the director's ultimate power because it's his vision. I know he's got the final wash on it. But it's tough to go through the process and not like what they are coming up with and feel excluded from the final process. And that's probably why one or two books are missing. Sometimes, I simply wasn't able to get the books produced quickly enough—I like them to be done by the time the movie is released, and then I'm onto other projects.

R.M. Your books function simultaneously as family albums and as documents of behind-the-scenes, movie production, but the photographs also seem to be full of aesthetic pleasures: the way you juggle, choreograph, and fill the frame with people, your attention to light and tonality, your exploitation of the peculiar characteristics of the moving lens of the panoramic Widelux camera. Can you talk a little about the purpose of these books and your aesthetic interests?

J.B. Originally, the books were meant as a gift to the cast and crew. So, of course, you want to include everybody who was significant in the making of the film, which puts some weird pressure on me like, "Oh, I've got to get this guy, I've got to get that guy, it's a shitty picture but he's important, so I'll put it in there anyway." So you're including things that are aesthetically displeasing. It's frustrating on that level. The upside, which is something I try to do with my acting work as well, is a lack of preciousness, or an apparent lack of preciousness.

R.M. That's what I find refreshing about your books: the photographs serve the book, and not an art museum or gallery. The goal for the books is not mass consumption, but to serve as a memento, much the way a family album would work. Thus you include both "good" pictures and "bad" pictures.

J.B. You're saying that's a valuable thing and not necessarily a bad thing.

R.M. Exactly. It feels loose. I like that. In fact, your books contain pictures made by other people. Sometimes you just hand off the camera to somebody else. Like the picture of you and your brother Beau [in *The Fabulous Baker Boys*] taken by your stand-in: great picture.

J.B. It's the best picture in the book!

R.M. You don't get uptight about it and say, "Let's not use it because it's better than mine." Or when you gave the camera to Barbra Streisand [in *The Mirror Has Two Faces*] and she took a picture of you and then you took a picture of her—those two pictures side by side are fantastic. That can only happen because you are serving the book idea and not your photography "career."

J.B. There is another aspect to these books. I tend to divide my life into little incarnations of films. I separate my life that way—by films and the space between the films—and to have those pieces of my life all photographed and documented, that's really gratifying. I love that.

R.M. It's like a personal history. But don't the films do the same thing?

J.B. Sure, but that's a character. This is the actual thing. Maybe some of this comes from my mother, who has kept a journal for sixty years, every day of her married life. And, about ten years ago, she gave each of her children a copy, written in her own hand. So I have a version of my life from my mother's point of view, in her own hand, from before I was born until I was twenty-one. Isn't that wild? I've seen her say, "I wonder what I was doing in 1942? Oh, look, Tuesday, August 4, I was...." There's something wonderful about that. I like to include my wife and kids in these books because kids really let you know how fast you're going, don't they?

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R.M. So you're saying that your books function like a personal diary. Of course. And then on top of that, they hold a lot of documentary significance. You were telling me about your admiration for Jacques-Henri Lartigue, who made those amazing panoramic pictures—his work functions as both a diary and an extraordinary document of the era. I can see the correlation with your work. You have a privileged-eye view, a rare access to Hollywood behind the scenes. Can you talk about this?

J.B. One of the things that I enjoy, or that I think has value, is that it's a unique perspective, historically speaking, on filmmaking in the last part of the millennium. And that is an important element of the work. Because, in a sense, it's so primitive what we do. And it probably won't be like this for very much longer.

R.M. Really? In what way? How will it change?

J.B. Well, they'll pay me a bunch of money and they'll just scan me in, you know. And it will all be up to the writers, the guys who are going to write in the computers. They'll say, "O.K. now, Jeff, get very emotional, cry, give us your sad thing."

R.M. You really think filmmaking will be like that?

J.B. Well, I've heard—this is a rumor—they offered Brando a part in a movie and he said, "I don't want to do that but I'll tell you what: I'll lease you my image and you pull your 'Jurassic' shit."

R.M. So you could be in a movie acting with Bogart, couldn't you?

J.B. Oh, yeah, sure. They're already doing that in commercials. They're phasing us out, basically.

R.M. A number of your pictures play with the illusions and paradoxes of filmmaking. In some pictures, like the one of Robin Williams in a mental ward [*The Fisher King*], the viewer doesn't know if the people surrounding him are actually real patients, or extras playing patients. Your work often raises the question of where reality ends and the movie begins. So, is he in a real mental institution, or are all these people extras?

J.B. I'm not telling you! Okay, okay. Actually, those are all extras.





Dream sequence from Fearless

R.M. So that was part of a scene, or was that Robin fooling around between takes?

J.B. No. That wasn't part of a scene. That was him. What Robin would do, often—which Terry Gilliam, the director, encouraged him to do—would be twenty or thirty minutes of improv. It was like a tick. A wonderful tick that we all got to enjoy. I have a couple of photographs of him doing that. But I've also photographed his very serious side.

R.M. Now, we're looking at this remarkable picture of these people crawling inside the cabin of the airplane [*Fearless*]. This is the dream sequence. You want to fill in?

J.B. This was the shot where I come walking down in a dream. Well, this photograph is a good instance of stumbling into a picture: you're coming to work to see what you have to do that day, and I see they're preparing this dream sequence of me, walking down in this corridor and it almost looks like something out of *Alien*. It was just too cool not to take a picture of. But, basically, it's Allen Davia's shot.

R.M. So you feel like you're cheating a little bit, but I have to say, the experience of the still is very different from the experience with the film. There's a really important distinction, for the viewer. There's something iconic about the still image. It just changes. Why do you like the Widelux camera? It's actually a very difficult format to use.

J.B. That camera, that format is very similar to a movie—it's like the screen. At the same time, it is more like what the human eye sees, somehow. Or maybe it's just my eye, I don't know. But I get this peripheral kind of thing. In the photographs, you really get a sense of at least two worlds—more than you would with a conventional 35mm-format camera.

*Each of the arts stimulates creative thoughts and expressions in other mediums—acting actually gets me writing songs, doing paintings, and so on. For example, I played an architect in *Fearless*. One night I woke up out of a dream, but in character, and just started making these drawings.*

R.M. Your self-portraits fascinate me: in each of your books, you reach around with your Widelux camera to catch yourself in character, not in a scene, but on the set—you're a Columbia math professor, a famous cowboy, a sea captain, a down-and-out bum, an alien. Do you think that an actor simply steps in and out of character, or do the fictional characters you play end up becoming an inseparable part of your reality?

J.B. As I said, each of these films is like a little incarnation, but it's not that schizoid that I actually think I've become Wild Bill Hickok. It's much simpler, really. Since it's a gift for everybody I wanted to include myself so that they could remember me in there, too. It serves that purpose, as well.

R.M. You've said earlier that there were times in your career that you considered quitting acting altogether to devote yourself to your other interests. You have this incredible recording studio at home, some good-size canvases you've been working on, and you've already begun exhibiting and publishing your photography. Could you give up your hugely successful acting career—you'd be free of the public scrutiny and pressures of Hollywood—in order to pursue your other talents and passions in privacy. Do you ever feel tempted to walk away from it all?

J.B. Not anymore. I've found over the years that each of the arts actually stimulates creative thoughts and expressions in other mediums—acting actually gets me writing songs, doing paintings, and so on. For example, I played an architect in *Fearless*. One night I woke up out of a dream, but in character, and just started making these drawings. When Peter Weir saw them he thought they were perfect for the film and decided to use them. In *American Heart*, the director said, "Jeff, sing a song." So I called Stan (also an ex-Gent who is a studio musician) in the middle of the night and said, "Stan, I need these peculiar chords to 'Sunny Side of the Street.'" So in the film I sing and play a small octave guitar. I've also been spending a lot of time in the recording studio lately writing songs. I guess to answer your question, I can see in the future not doing as many films—if I'm doing a music project or something like that. My need to create may be satiated. But I do enjoy the communal art form of filmmaking, and it is how I make my living. I guess I wouldn't want to quit my day job.

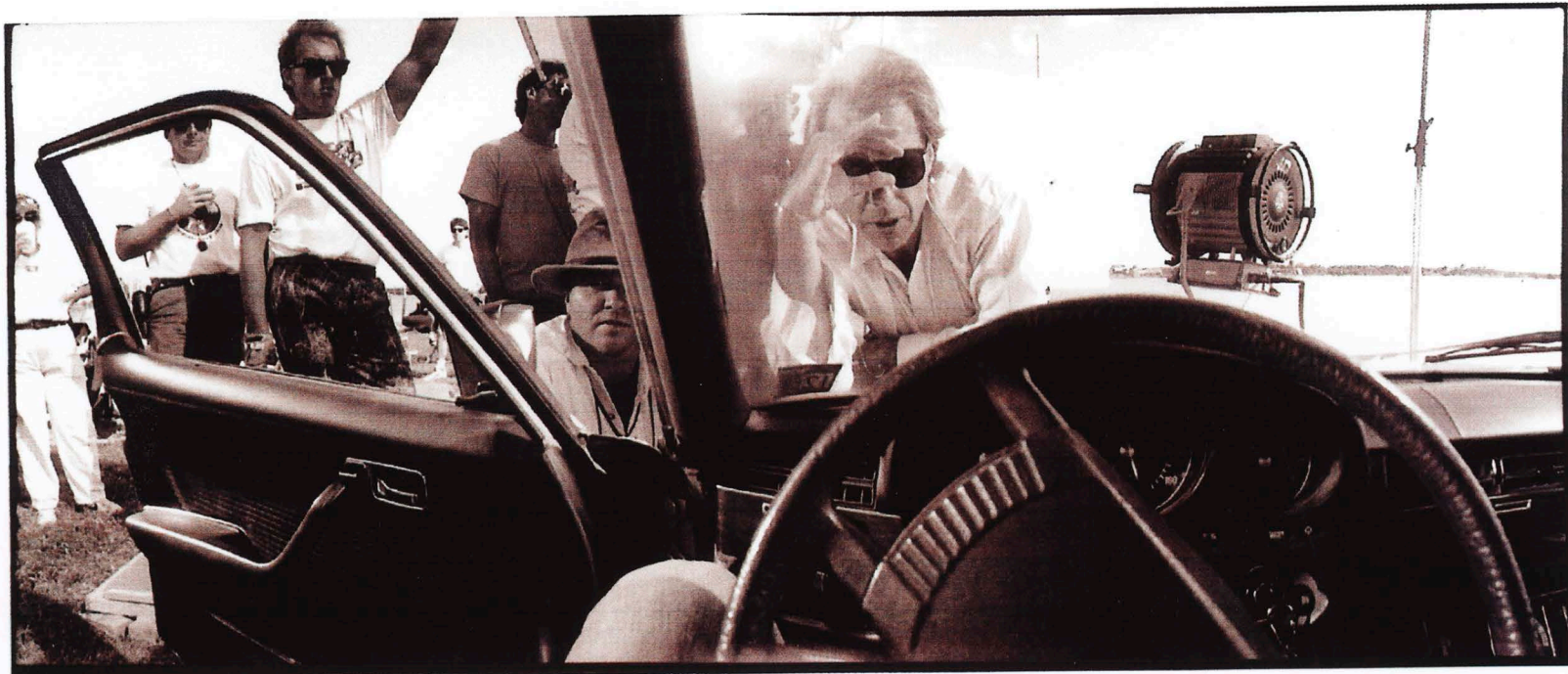


Peter Bogdanovich likes us up in Tallahassee



My Tuckermation back stage in Tucker • Terry, Robin and me at work in Florida King





'Peter Bogdanovich Lines Us Up' (*Texasville*, 1989)



'Robin Laughing in His Jammies' (*The Fisher King*, 1990)

next year is to use the media to stimulate action to end childhood hunger in America.

There are a lot of things I like to do besides act. I play music, paint, and photograph. I remember early on in my acting career, I noticed that when I started to prepare for a new role, all my other creative juices would kick in too. Rather than concentrating on my preparation, I'd find myself wanting to paint and do music and take pictures. That was quite disconcerting at first, because I thought it was taking away from my acting. But after doing several films, I realized that all these creative impulses came from the same place: from that place of surrender, from that place of losing oneself, from that place where surprise is king.

Nature will often supply you with the most interesting direction or preparation for a scene. But you have to pay attention to her message.

I'm reminded of a time in New York when I was making *The Fisher King* with Robin Williams. We were shooting down by the river under this bridge pretty late one night. Robin and I were dressed in our wardrobe, which consisted basically of rags. Anyway, between set-ups, we decided to go sit down somewhere to prepare for our next scene. There was this little cement block right under the bridge, so we walked over, and just as we sat down, there was this big *floph-floph-floph-floph*. We looked up to see what it was, and this huge cloud of pigeon shit came raining down on us. All over our faces, our clothes, everything.

I turned to Robin, and he turned to me, and we had absolutely nothing to say to each other. We just sat there with shit on our faces, thinking, "What did that mean?"

Like a Zen kōan, we carried the knowledge of that moment back into the scene with us. God knows how it affected our work. ❖

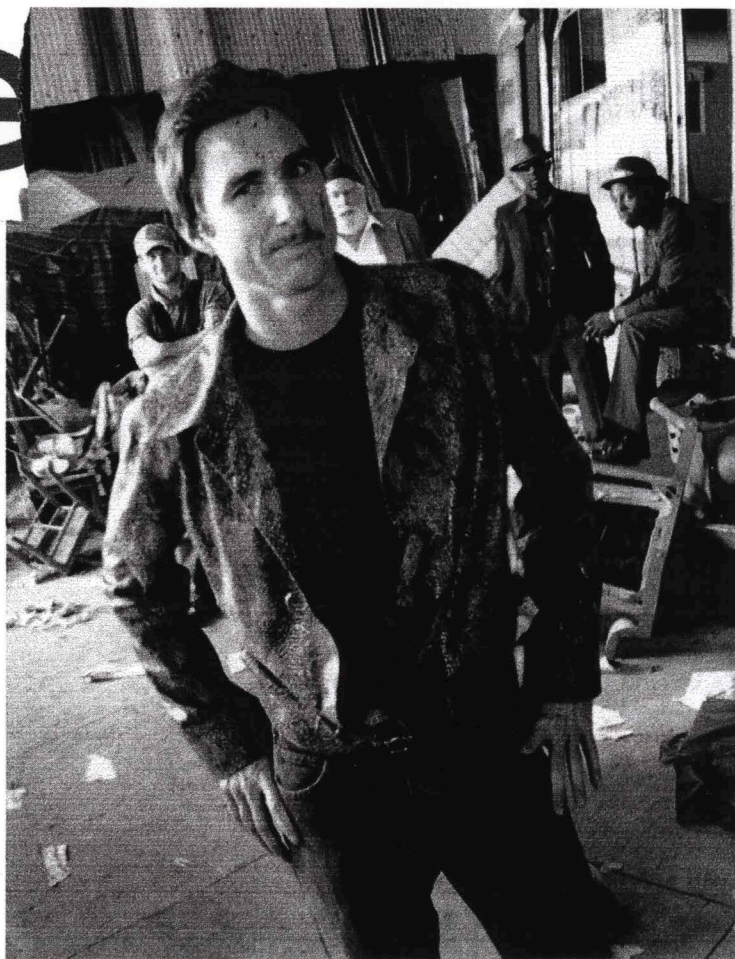
PICTURE SHOW

JEFF BRIDGES documented life behind the scenes on many of his films. Consider this your actor's-eye view

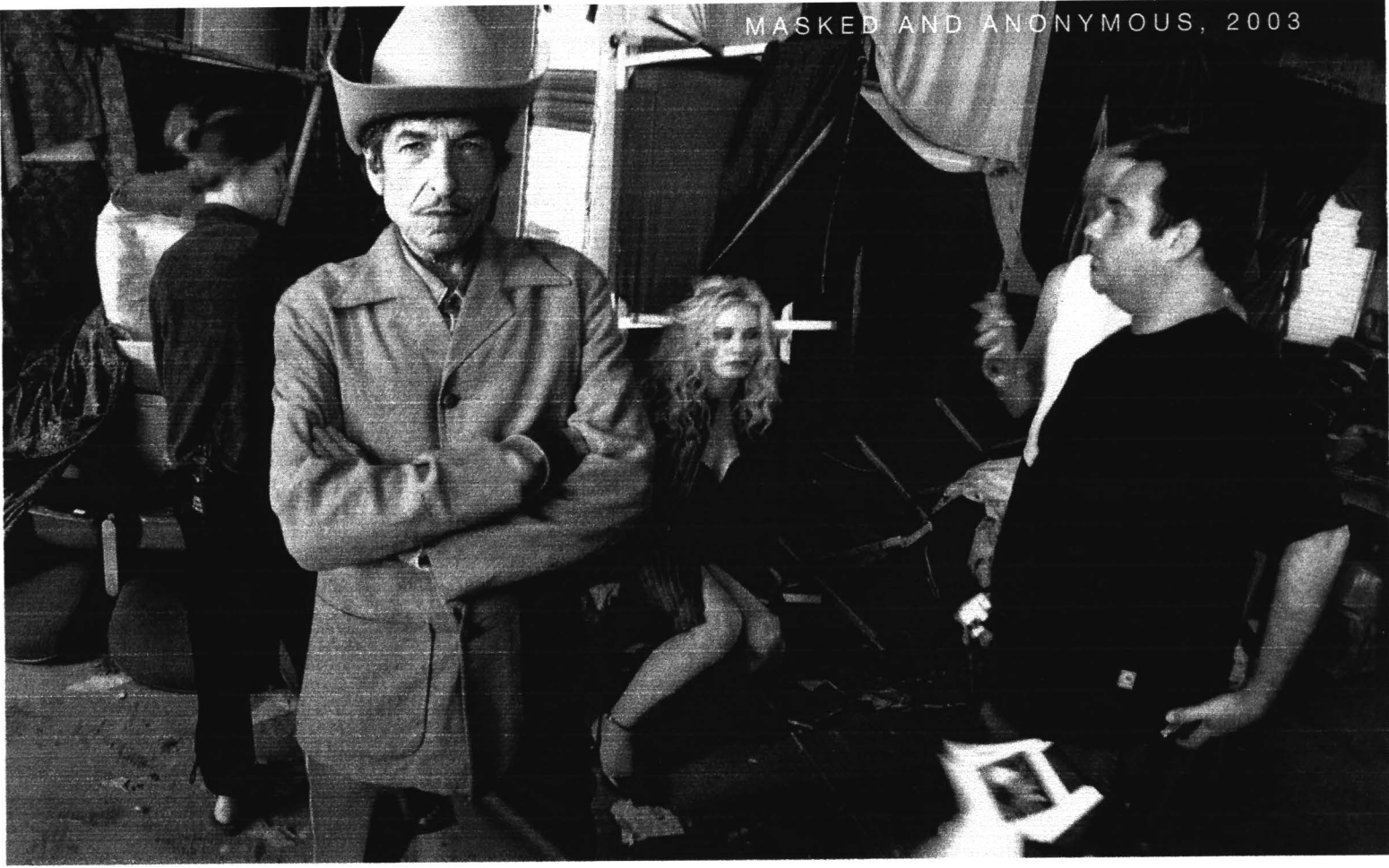
In 1978 Jeff Bridges received a Widelux camera as a belated wedding present from his wife, Sue (they married in 1975); it was the beginning of a joined-at-the-hip romance. Always with camera, the actor took pictures on the sets of many of the movies he has done since—from *Starman* in 1984 to this year's *Masked and Anonymous*. "You have such intense periods with the group you're working with, it's nice to have a record," says Bridges, who compiles photo albums as parting gifts for the cast and crew at the end of each shoot. Now his favorite images—from fake skylines and other grand illusions to intimate moments like Joan Allen ▷

Top: Luke Wilson, Bob Dylan and Jessica Lange in a scene from one of Bridges' latest films, *Masked and Anonymous*. **Bottom:** In another recent photo, Bridges takes to the stands, playing just another face in the crowd for a racetrack scene in *Seabiscuit*.

From *Pictures by Jeff Bridges*, to be published in November 2003 by powerHouse Books, in association with Herter Studio. Copyright ©2003 by Jeff Bridges. Proceeds go to the Motion Picture and Television Fund, a nonprofit organization that offers charitable care and support to film-industry workers.



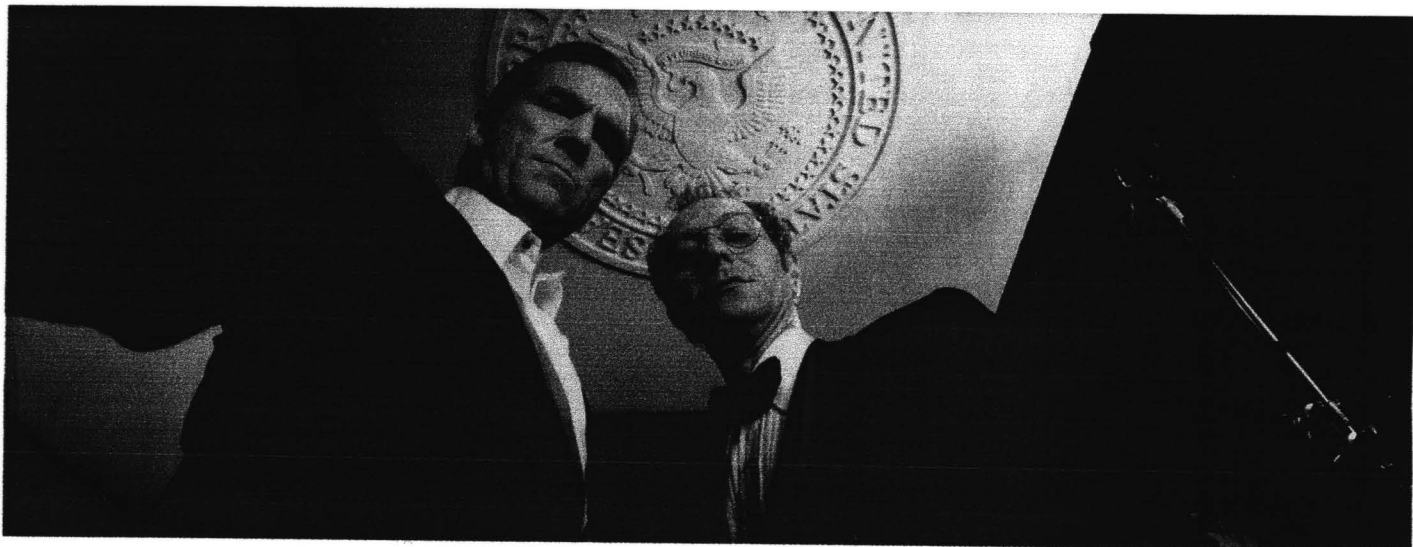
MASKED AND ANONYMOUS, 2003



SEABISCUIT, 2003



THE CONTENDER, 2000



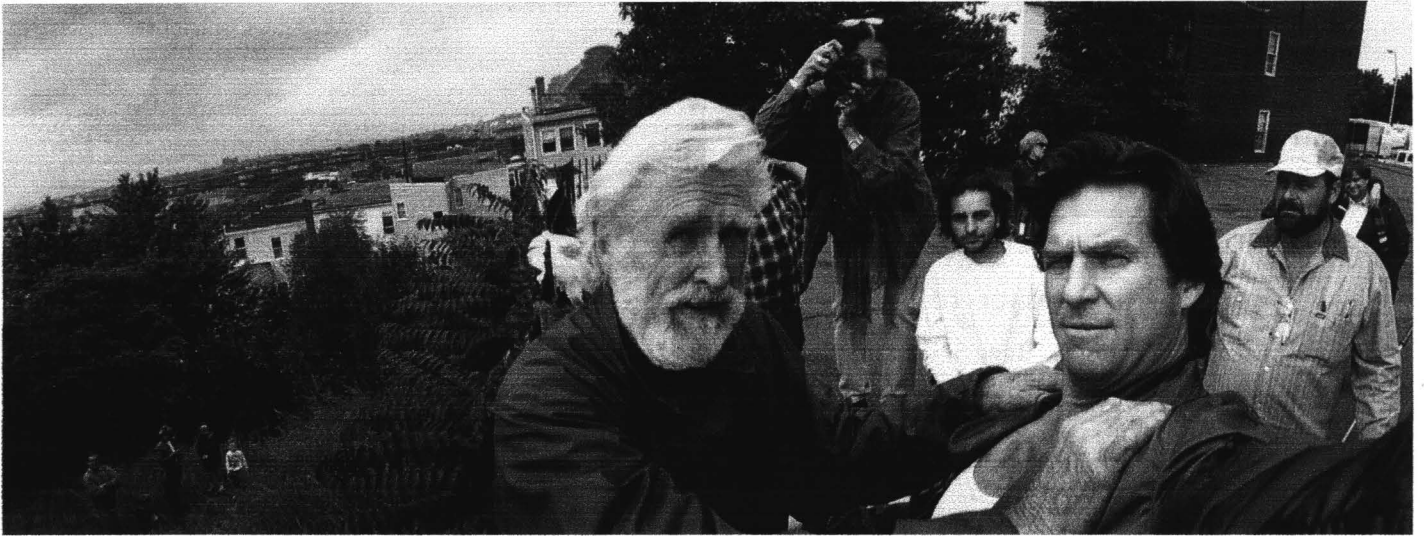
"To me, acting is a lot like playing pretend when you were a kid," writes Bridges, posing here with Gary Oldman.



Joan Allen in the political spotlight. Sound and light technicians have to work together with actors, says Bridges: "It's a dance."



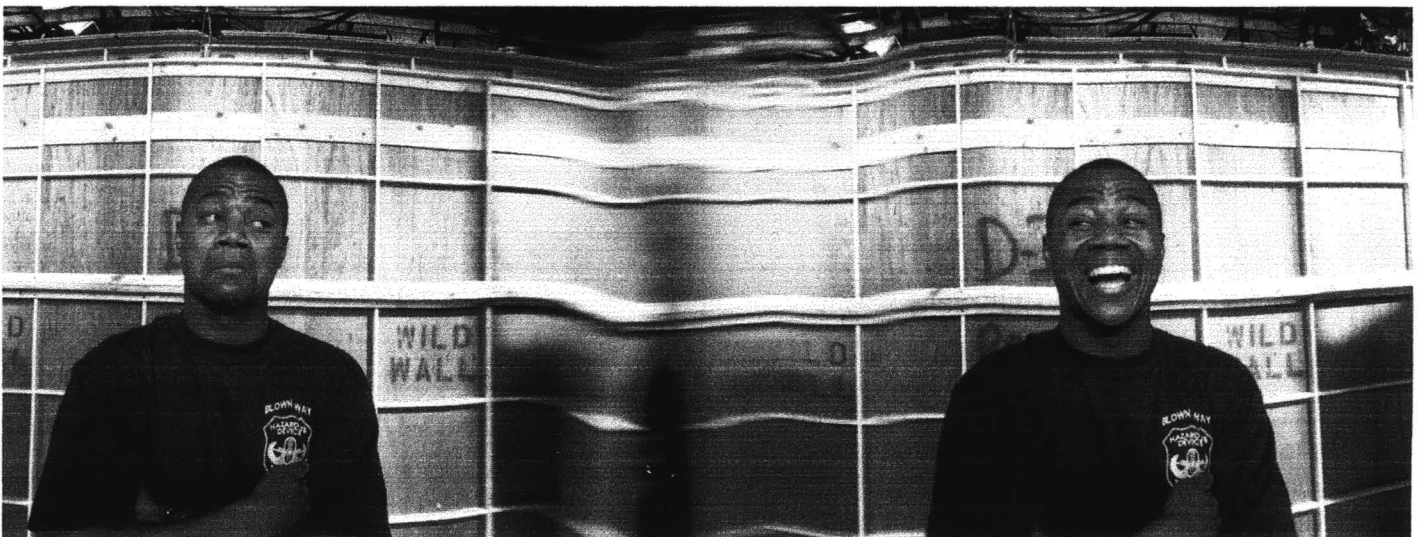
Christian Slater has his makeup done in a photo Bridges calls "Getting Painted."



"I loved working with my dad," says Bridges of his late father, Lloyd. "He enjoyed the process so much. His joy was contagious."



The crew is—almost—blown away by the movie's big bang.



Cuba Gooding Jr. turns his frown upside down for Bridges' ongoing "Comoedia/Tragoedia" collection.

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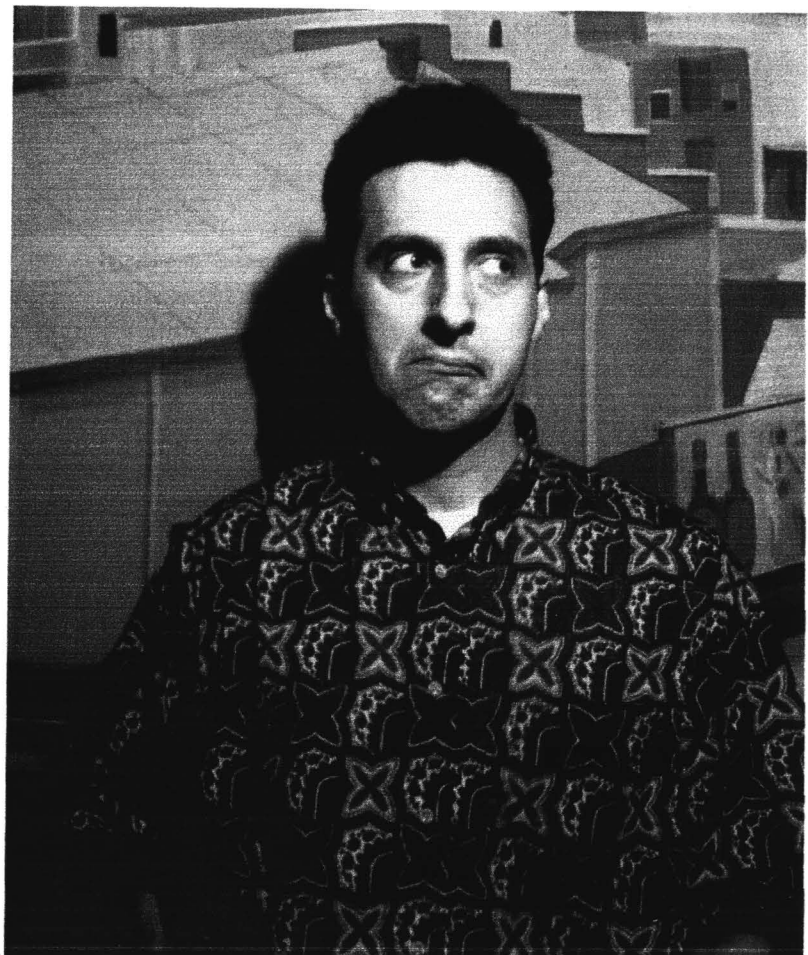
administering a temple massage—appear in a book, *Pictures by Jeff Bridges*, out in November from Powerhouse Books and Herter Studio.

Besides offering a new perspective on the scenes being filmed, Bridges' images document his love for moviemaking and photography. "Looking at a proof sheet for the first time is like opening a Christmas present," he writes in his book. "What a surprise!"

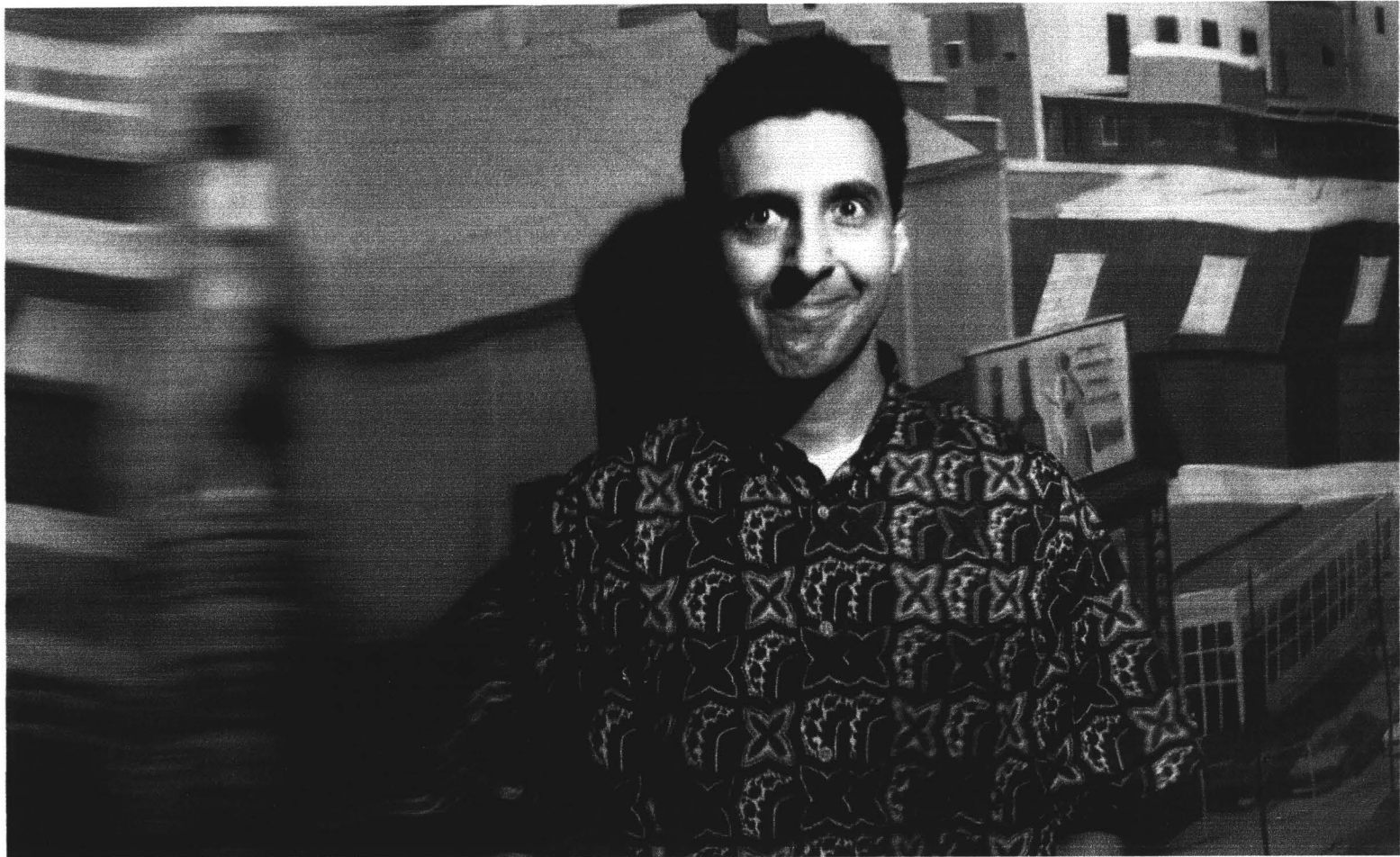
The element of surprise is one of the reasons he favors a Widelux. Instead of a traditional shutter, it has a slit that exposes the film as a lens pans almost 180 degrees. "Its viewfinder isn't accurate, and there's no manual focus, so it has an arbitrariness to it, a capricious quality," Bridges says. "It's almost as if the camera has peripheral vision, registering multiple stories within a single frame." The wide lens and slow shutter speed even allow a subject to move quickly and appear twice in the same image. That feature inspired Bridges to start a series called "Comoedia/Tragoedia," for which he asked co-stars like Cuba Gooding Jr., Michelle Pfeiffer and John Turturro to smile, then change position and frown, creating a human update of the classic Comedy/Tragedy theater masks.

But some of Bridges' most compelling photos are unposed shots of actors, technicians, sets ▷

Top: For this fantasy sequence, "The Dude's Dream," in which Julianne Moore makes like a Viking chorus girl, Bridges had to lie on a small skateboard and roll across the checkerboard floor, surrounded by dancers wearing bowling-pin hats. **Bottom:** John Turturro adds his Comedy/Tragedy faces to the series.



THE BIG LEBOWSKI, 1998



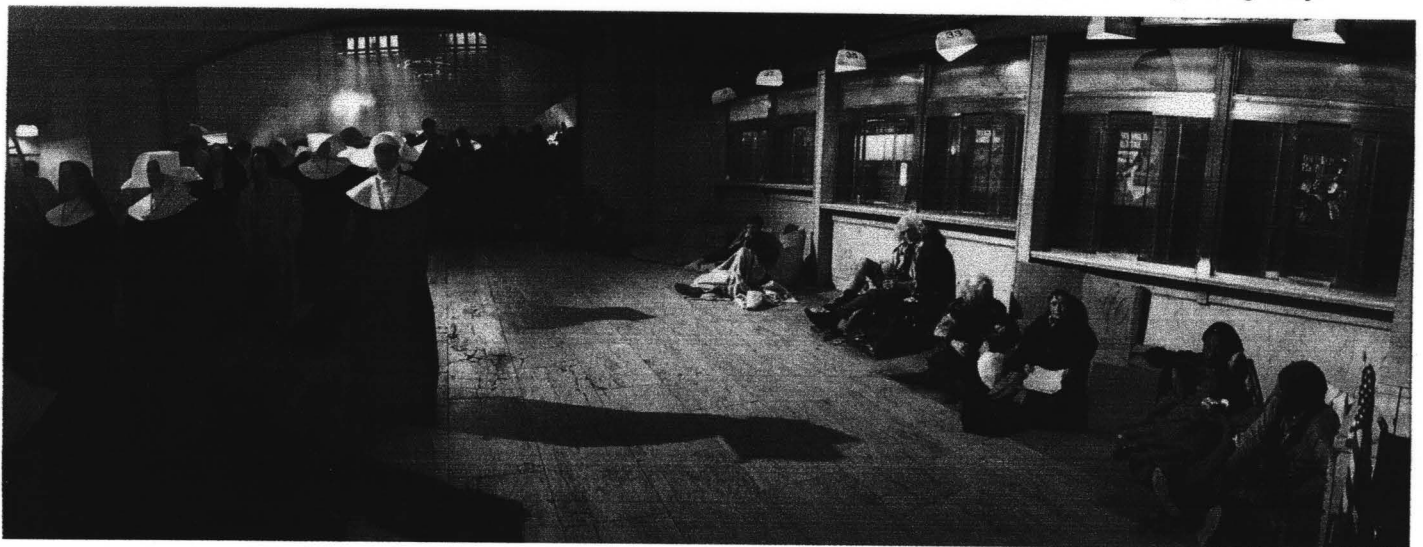
THE FISHER KING, 1991



This skyline is a set. "Stairs going nowhere, lights, props and backdrops" are common simulations of the real world, Bridges writes.



Further blurring on- and off-camera characters, "Robin [Williams] would raise our spirits by getting up and riffing," Bridges says.



Grand Central Terminal—the real one in New York City—was the backdrop for a scene featuring both nuns and the homeless.

TUCKER: THE MAN AND HIS DREAM, 1988



Martin Landau, who won a Golden Globe for best supporting actor for the film, does double duty in a "Comedia/Tragoedia" shot.



Joan Allen, who played Bridges' wife, relaxes director Francis Ford Coppola between scenes with a temple massage.



"Peeking behind the curtain is fascinating," says Bridges. The "Tuckerettes" in this image seem to agree.

bookexcerpt

and props, the moviemaking mechanics that he refers to as “the nuts and bolts of fantasy.”

These images give civilian readers fascinating backstage glimpses—so much so that Bridges was a bit conflicted about sharing industry secrets. “Taking pictures on movie sets exposes a lot of the magic,” he explains. “I am ambivalent about revealing too much—showing how the rabbit is pulled out of the hat.” But he ultimately decided to dish, because “it is impossible to expose the real magic. The real magic is too deep, and the deeper you dig, the deeper it goes.”

On a more practical level, Bridges is torn on set between acting and photography. “If I were just there to take pictures and not performing the character I play in the piece, I would be a lot more diligent in my photography, getting different images,” he says. “There’s always something exciting that you’re going to miss, and it’s very frustrating. And that happens all the time in life; you say, ‘Gee, I wish I had my camera!’”

Still, over the past 25 years, Bridges has managed to remain faithful to both his Widelux and his acting. “I’ve been taking pictures and making movies my whole life,” he says. Oh, and what about Sue, who set Bridges up with the Widelux? He’s still devoted to her too. —Eleni N. Gage

“The light loves Michelle,” Bridges writes of his luminous co-star. Top: Pfeiffer sings from atop a piano as Susie Diamond. “When we finally got around to shooting, it was 3 A.M.,” Bridges recalls. “Michelle was exhausted.” Bottom: Pfeiffer poses for a “Comoedia/Tragoedia” portrait.

