

John Huston

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by Lillian
Ross

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"Revisited"

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We don't like to start a new decade without catching up on the adventures of John Huston, the movie director and actor. We last wrote about him in 1972, when he was here from St. Clerans—his house in Galway, Ireland, where he was living at the time—for the opening of his twenty-ninth movie, "Fat City." Last week, he was here from a beach compound in Las Caletas, Mexico—where he is living now—in connection with the following activities: preparing for the opening of "Wise Blood," Movie No. 35; turning in to Knopf the final draft of the manuscript of his autobiographical "An Open Book;" meeting with representatives of the Film Society of Lincoln Center, who intend to have "A Tribute to John Huston" for their annual spring gala, on May 5th; and planning his next picture, "Escape to Victory," which he is scheduled to start filming in Hungary in a couple of months with Sylvester Stallone, Michael Caine, Max von Sydow, and Pelé, the one and only. Huston is now seventy-three—not that the number says much about *him*, we were delighted to see when we met him at the Pierre, where he was getting set to go out into the frosty night wearing a green-and-beige plaid Irish-wool cap, a white Irish-wool cardigan over a white turtleneck, tan cavalry twill trousers, and brown Maxwell of London moccasins. The cap covered about a sixth of his hair, which was long, white, and gray. His beard, incipiently Tolstoyan, matched. Everything else was the same as it had been for years: the deeply conspiratorial manner, conveying the

dramatic impression that each thing he said was strictly confidential; the unique, melodic actor's voice to convey it all with; the loping walk and the enlistment of his entire body to punctuate and underline the talk; and the welling up of irrepressible laughter at what was being said, especially by him.

We followed Huston outside to a limousine, where he greeted the chauffeur with his conspiratorial grace and directed him to take us to 20 West Fifty-seventh Street. There, he told us, he was going to meet Stallone and Pelé for the first time.

"The picture takes place during the Second World War and has a soccer game in it between the Germans and the hungry, weakened *prisoners*," Huston said as the car made its way through heavy evening traffic. "And we've written in a part for Pelé. It will be the first time he's ever really *acted*, and I'm told he's looking forward to it!" He gave his laugh, took off his cap, and brushed the hair back from his forehead.

"How's life in Mexico?" we asked.

"Just wonderful—just what I want at the moment," Huston said. "I've built my own little two-room house, with a fireplace, and separate little houses for a cook, for my assistant, Gladys Hill, and for guests—all overlooking the Bahía de Banderas, Bay of Flags. It's a fifteen-mile drive, to get there, from Puerto Vallarta to Boca de Tomatlán, a tiny fishing village, where I take a boat with an outboard motor,

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and in thirty minutes I'm in Las Calletas. I grow my own beans, snow peas, tomatoes, lettuce, corn—everything—and we have our own *fruit* trees! Bananas, pineapples—everything. The swimming is just wonderful. And the *snorkeling*. And there's time to write and to read! Did you know that we *read* in Mexico?" Huston laughter again. "Of course, I don't get to stay there as much as I'd like. I came here from Atlanta, where I did one of the last shots for 'Phobia,' a Canadian-produced picture of mine, with Paul Michael Glaser, the Starsky of 'Starsky and Hutch.' I was in Toronto for three months with that one. Then Mexico for Christmas. Then to Los Angeles. *Then* to Atlanta. From here, I go back to Los Angeles. Back to Mexico for four weeks before starting the soccer picture in May. Freddie Fields, the producer of the picture, met me earlier today. We had to decide on some alternative locations, just in case the Russians make it impossible for us to work in Hungary." Huston put his cap back on. "We've got a perfect stadium for our soccer game. In Pécs, outside Budapest. It dates from 1940. Perfect. Well, here we are." He stuffed his cap in the pocket of the cardigan.

As Huston got out of the car, he was greeted by a sporty-looking, California-suntanned man wearing a green windbreaker.

"Herb Nanas, John," the man said as we all entered a loft building. "I'm Sly's manager. Sly is upstairs, shooting his picture—'Hawks.' Sly plays a decoy cop." Nanas spoke

in a low voice, almost a whisper. "The picture is without a director," he said, with a weak smile. "The producer fired the director, so Sly is directing it himself until we get a new director."

"Well, now," Huston said. "Well, now."

"This way," Nanas said, ushering us into a small elevator. It let us out into a loft that was fixed up to look like a clothing designer's studio and had been taken over by cameras, lights, makeup tables, and about three dozen picture hands, including cameraman, grips, and still photographers. Stallone, who had a dark, short beard and was wearing a sports shirt and bluejeans, with a gun in a holster on one hip, stood near a makeup table looking rather glum.

"Sly likes his beard," Nanas half-whispered to Huston. "He's depressed about losing it for your picture. John, you know Bob Willoughby," he added as one of the still photographers came over and shook hands with Huston.

"I saw you in Ireland," Willoughby said. "Seven years ago."

"Of course," Huston said dramatically. "How *are* you, Bob?"

"St. Clerans all gone?" Willoughby asked.

"Yes, it's all gone now, Bob," Huston said, leaning back, with a great smile, and getting ready to welcome Stallone, who was coming over.

"Sly!" Huston said, hugging Stallone.

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"John!" Stallone said, hugging Huston.

"Sly admires him enormously," Nanas said to us. "Sly is thrilled to be working with him."

They were joined by Freddie Fields, a trim, dapper, impeccably arrayed, softly smiling man wearing black-rimmed glasses and carrying a black attaché case.

"Freddie!" Huston said.

"John! Sly!"

They huddled in a three-way hug.

"Fields is a prime example of your modern producer," a grip behind us said. "He used to be a prime agent. He founded Creative Management Associates, which is now *International Creative Management*. Then he turned Producer. The agents are becoming the big producers now."

"I think it's a fine script," Stallone was saying to Huston.

"I think it's a fine script," Huston said, giving the line a much better reading.

"Here's Pelé," Fields said to the others. "He's an enormously warm human being."

Pelé, wearing a three-quarter-length coat of marmot fur, ambled over, holding out his hand.

"Pelé!"

"John! Sly! Freddie!"

A four-way hug.

"Erik!" somebody called out. "The soccer ball."

A solemn-looking fourteen-year-old boy standing nearby threw in a soccer ball. The still photographers took pictures of the foursome with the ball.

“He”—Fields broke loose from the huddle to gesture toward Pelé—“is a big ‘Rocky’ fan. He’s a big ‘Asphalt Jungle’ fan.”

“You’ll have to teach me how to stretch my arm up,” Stallone said to Pelé, holding his right arm straight up over his head. “In ‘Rocky II,’ I tore my right pectoral muscle. They had to drill a hole in a bone and tie the muscle through it. One hundred and fifty-six stitches.”

“When Pelé heard the story of the picture, he loved it,” Fields said. “The only thing he wants is to make sure the soccer elements are accurate. We hope to get a top soccer coach to do the choreography—Bobby Robson, the manager of the Ipswich Town Football Club.”

“We have to find out what kind of pants they wore in 1940” Stallone said.

“Short pants,” Pelé said.

“Short pants,” Huston said, giving it his own reading.

“Now they wear shorter short pants,” Pelé said.

“Have you seen the indoor version?” Stallone said.

“It’s a lot rougher,” Fields said.

“So fast,” Pelé said.

“I don’t get *basketball*,” Huston said. “They’re all six nine or six ten.”

Everybody laughed.

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“And the scores are always one thirteen or one seventeen,” Huston said, leading the laughter.

After a pause, Stallone said, “We’ve got a fine script. We’re happy. We’re alive.”

“And making pictures,” Huston said, with his laugh.

Lillian Ross has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1945. She has written often about movie-makers—including Clint Eastwood, Federico Fellini, Akira Kurosawa, Oliver Stone, Tommy Lee Jones, Wes Anderson and Francis Coppola. John Huston was the leading character in her classic book, *Picture*, about the making of the 1951 film *The Red Badge of Courage*. The book, still in print, is generally acknowledged to be the first time a long factual story was written—the interrelationship of Huston, the director, Gottfried Reinhardt, the producer, Dore Schary the M-G-M production head, and Louis B. Mayer, head of the studio as the other main novelistic characters—in fictional form.