

# Brian De Palma is a revolutionary

By STEVE DITLEA

At 27, Brian De Palma is probably the most important American director today, because of the success of one film. It didn't get rave reviews, didn't win any awards nor get nominated for an Oscar, yet "Greetings" is the most important American movie of the last few years. De Palma has brought to American movies a revolution in both form and content which will serve as a model for a new wave of American film makers of the seventies. Already, young directors talk of making "another 'Greetings,'" and the title of the movie has become synonymous with a new genre: the low-budget commercial film which is fresh, spontaneous, topical, and youthful. The success of "Greetings" has opened the way for more independently produced films which reach a level of honesty no Hollywood picture could ever aspire to. The American counterpart of the French Nouvelle Vague is about to start now that De Palma's film has broken many of the barriers to wide public acceptance of low-budget, unorthodox features.

In talking about his films, De Palma is extremely articulate; it is obvious that he is constantly thinking and intellectualizing about both the technique and the content of his movies. He considers himself somewhat of a formalist and can go on at length about the characteristics of a type of shot which he particularly liked using. There is a boyish quality to De Palma as he gleefully recounts a scene, an idea, or a theme, ever excited by the discovery he once made and incorporated into one of his films: he is still a little too young to have become jaded and his enthusiasm has not been dulled by the realities and obstacles which usually confront directors.

When he talks, De Palma shows a mixture of great technical expertise and apparent naivete about the practicalities and difficulties of working in the film industry. He doesn't worry about the day when his creativity will be hampered by the unpleasant necessities involved in making high-budget films, nor about the prospect of someday having to compromise himself in order to get a film made.

"I guess I've always been lucky; I've always been my own boss had my own way on any project I've worked on"; De Palma's words reflect the unique position of the independent film maker. Yet, in an industry where giant sums of money are wasted on ridiculous projects, the independent must hustle to find the relatively small amounts of money necessary for making what are often very original and worthy films. Despite these difficulties, De Palma is quite optimistic; he considers his material needs as relatively unimportant, his one all-consuming interest is making films.

De Palma first started making movies while an undergraduate at Columbia. A graduate of the class of 1962, he remembers the time when film making was the somewhat exotic preoccupation of a few eccentrics on campus. Of the other students making films at the time, De Palma says, "I thought they were jerks and they thought I was a jerk." The lack of a conducive atmosphere for film making at Columbia was not much of a handicap to De Palma; he joined a film making group downtown and sold almost all of his worldly possessions to buy himself a movie camera. When asked why he started to make films despite all of the difficulties which faced him at the time, De Palma shrugs and explains that film making did not seem to be so difficult or unusual to him. He came to film with a good

knowledge of photography and only started to make his own movies after having helped his older brother on one.

De Palma credits his brother as an important influence during his early life. The two were always rivals; when his brother became interested in physics and went on to M.I.T., Brian also became interested in science. Whatever his brother did, he would try to do better. When his brother became interested in film, it was only natural that Brian would try to make movies too. Somewhere along the line, De Palma went through the standard identity crisis, realized that he wasn't really going to be a physicist and concentrated on acting and film making. He became general manager of Players, acted in plays both at Columbia and Sarah Lawrence and made three fairly ambitious short films.

Of his first film "Icarus", made during his sophomore year, De Palma has mixed

and used only simple techniques, De Palma spent a total of about \$5000 on his three student efforts. When asked about where he got this money, De Palma shrugs, mumbles something about getting in anywhere he could and indicates that he led a very spartan existence in order to save money.

After graduating from Columbia, De Palma got a writing fellowship and decided to use it at Sarah Lawrence. It was there that he worked under Wilford Leach, head of the drama department, and met Cynthia Munroe. Together, the three of them made "The Wedding Party," De Palma's first feature. Originally shot in 1964, the film opened recently in the village, offering an opportunity to see De Palma's early work and giving film buffs a chance to test the auteur theory as "The Wedding Party" play simultaneously with "Greetings", only a few blocks away. "The Wedding Party" is a good film

of events preceding their wedding. As he meets the bride's family and participates in the various receptions and ceremonies, he begins to have his doubts about going through with the marriage. In the end, of course, he goes through with it.

The main interest of the film resides in a type of comedy of manners which is seldom seen on the screen today. Most of the humor in the film stems from the attitudes and appearance of the members of the bride's family, all of whom are depicted as broad caricatures. This kind of humor is best when it is underplayed since so much of it depends on the obvious attributes of the characters. Occasionally situation comedy creeps in and when it does, it upsets the mood of the film. De Palma's penchant for scenes with constant movement is a definite asset in this sort of film where the characterization is basically weak and the film should never slow down lest the shallowness of the characters become obvious. It is during Leach's scenes—when there is a feeble attempt at letting the characters reveal themselves—that the basic weakness of the portrayals, especially the bride and bridegroom, shows up in the most glaring way.

The best parts of the movie are pure De Palma, as evidenced by similar scenes in "Greetings." Most obvious are the scenes of the bridegroom talking with his two friends. Using a technique which is later used in an almost identical scene in "Greetings" De Palma uses constant jump cuts while the two friends give their advice. Even the participants in this scene are predecessors of the characters in the later film: Allester is a ringer for Lloyd and the bridegroom's other friend is portrayed by Robert De Niro, who also stars in "Greetings," (though in a very different role).

De Palma is especially fond of the scene where he alternated parts of two takes where the bench the characters are sitting on is reversed while the rest of the scene remains the same. The dinner party scene is punctuated by a skillful use of jump cut and pans. Scenes using slow or fast motion to simulate silent movie comedies are perhaps overdone, but are always technically excellent. One chase scene on the dunes of a beach is a true masterpiece in the Senett tradition.

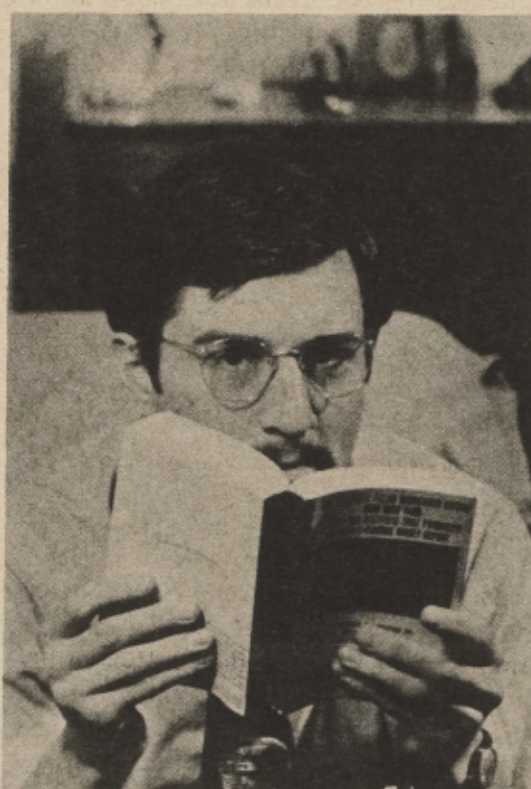
"The Wedding Party" gave De Palma important experience in the making of a feature. Working with a budget of \$100,000, a respectable sum for this kind of independent production, De Palma shot it in 35 mm. black & white, using location shooting exclusively to cut down on costs. In working on the script, De Palma used actors' improvisations and incorporated them for dialogue material. De Palma's direction of his actors was heavily dependent on improvisational techniques and this is most obvious in the contrast between those scenes and the more heavy-handed sequences which show Leach's touch.

De Palma spent nearly two years editing "The Wedding Party" and in the process, added to his experience with film. In order to salvage inferior footage, he came up with some ingenious editing solutions testifying to his technical expertise. To save scenes which were out of focus, De Palma resorted to superimpositions of rain in several cases and of a window in one case. As a result of his cameraman's mistakes, De Palma admits that he had to make "The Wedding Party" into a very wet movie.

After "The Wedding Party", De Palma taught film at Sarah Lawrence and at N.Y.U. He tends to be critical of film schools despite his acknowledgement of the necessity for training film directors.



Brian De Palma



Robert De Niro



feelings. Though a Spectator reviewer at the time singled it out as being the best of a series of student films, De Palma laughs at the pretentiousness of the symbolism he used in the story. The film was a forty minute comedy about identity and conformism. "It's just like a first novel, with all of the faults of a first novel," De Palma said in response to a suggestion that students might want to see the film. His next work was "Dionysus," a film he shot at Sarah Lawrence; it too dealt with conformity and tackled the problem of the artist. It is only his third student film, "Wotan's Awake" which De Palma thinks is still worth seeing. Made over a period of nearly two years, "Wotan" won De Palma acclaim as it won a prize in an experimental film competition. De Palma is enthusiastic about the sound track, the photography and the acting on this film. On all of his films, De Palma did the photography and the editing, learning much about the nature of the film medium in the process. Though his films were shot without sound

in its own right; it becomes doubly interesting when viewed as a source for many of the most successful bits in "Greetings". De Palma came up with the original idea for the film and wrote the scenario with Cynthia Munroe, who was providing financial backing. As the project took form, they sought the help of Wilford Leach, who had had experience in directing and staging in the theatre.

The film suffers from a dichotomy stemming from the collaboration of two very different influences: film and drama. De Palma's touch is evident in the most cinematic scenes in the film; scenes where there is constant movement by the camera, the characters or the dialogue. The film drags during the more theatrical moments when the camera is used to record what can best be described as stage business; these are Leach's scenes and are certainly inferior to the rest of the film.

The story of "The Wedding Party" is simple: a young bridegroom comes to his bride's home for the few days

Steve Ditlea, a senior in the College, has recently been rejected from graduate school.

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De Palma taught himself most of what he knows about film and tends to feel that this is the best way for any one to learn.

For a few years De Palma worked on documentaries, doing his own shooting and editing. Among these films was the award winning "The Responsive Eye", an op art, and an ambitious project on the legal division of the N.A.A.C.P. which is still to be edited. His second feature, "Murder A la Mod" was made in 1967. De Palma feels

for the film's importance to young film-makers.

The key to the significance of "Greetings" rests in an understanding of the problem of cost in film production. Even the cheapest standard Hollywood feature costs millions of dollars to make. With such large sums of money at stake, a director must turn out a standardized product with the greatest appeal for the largest audience. With so great a financial investment, control over a film's content rests in the hands of businessmen and not the filmmaker; the result is the death of creativity and the birth of subtle forms of censorship.

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that some day it may be considered a classic of sorts. It reflects his interest in Hitchcockian cinema, an interest which De Palma hopes to pursue this summer in another film he wants to do after "Son of Greetings."

The idea for "Greetings" came up after De Palma had met Chuck Hirsch while working for a while at Universal. Hirsch had been struck by Godard's "Masculin-Feminin;" he wanted to make an American "Masculin-Feminin" which would reflect the qualities of youth and spontaneity which Godard had captured on film. Hirsch and De Palma wrote a scenario—Hirsch included his own political preoccupations, as well as a lasting interest in the Kennedy assassination, and computer dating, and De Palma was intrigued with the idea of voyeurism for one of his characters.

As plans for the film took shape, it became obvious that no one actor could embody all of the qualities of a Jean-Pierre Leaud. De Palma decided to use Robert De Niro, an actor who he feels is truly outstanding for his ability to identify with a role. In the end, De Niro's portrayal of Jon, the voyeur is the best characterization in the film. De Palma, a former general manager of Columbia Players asked the then general manager, Gerritt Graham, for actors to audition for a part in the film. Gerritt got the part of Lloyd Clay, giving a flamboyant performance in the movie. The other lead was played by Jonathan Warden, an off-Broadway actor. Almost all of the remaining roles were given to amateurs, friends of De Palma and Hirsch or chance acquaintances. As a result of their casting for the picture, De Palma and Hirsch came up with actors who made up for inexperience by providing youthfulness and spontaneity.

Once again, De Palma used improvisations for dialogue in the shooting script. During the shooting itself, the actors improvised excellent lines, including De Niro's marvelous line about "peep art", a new art form based on voyeurism. Gerritt Graham's story about the Barnard mixer was based on a few suggestions by De Palma and a lot of improvisation by Graham; the result is extremely funny and spontaneous, comparing favorably with Jean Claude-Leaud's story of mashed potatoes and the rediscovery of Galileo's theory of the Universe in "Masculin Feminin".

De Palma and Hirsch succeeded at making an excellent film which broke a lot of conventions. Unfortunately, the reviews which appeared when "Greetings" came out were lukewarm; this was due in large part to the shortsightedness of "official" critics who tend to see only the manifest content of a film without regard to its form. For one critic to say the "Greetings" is "an overground sex protest film" is about as enlightening as saying that "Breathless" is a gangster thriller. A reviewer who is satisfied to give a synopsis and make some evaluation of the performances in "Greetings" is overlooking the factors which are responsible,

Until recently, American film makers who wanted to have real artistic control over their films had to be satisfied with selling out to the formula film or had to go outside of the "industry" into independent productions with limited appeal or into the "underground" with esoteric and often self-indulgent films.

By making a film for considerably less than the normal cost, costing only forty thousand dollars which would pay back its original investment after relatively few showings to limited audiences, Brian De Palma was able to retain total control over his work and was able to create something fresh and exciting without compromises. Yet, by aiming at the regular movie houses instead of the underground or "art houses", he was able to reach a greater audience and have a greater commercial success. This last point is extremely important, for without a real commercial success an independent film maker will have difficulty in ever making another feature.

To make "Greetings," De Palma and his producer Chuck Hirsch broke many rules of film making and somehow got away with it. Making a color 35 mm. feature film for the relatively minuscule sum of \$40,000 was something impossible until De Palma and Hirsch did it. Starting shooting without knowing how much money would be forthcoming for their movie, De Palma began using 16 mm. film, only to start over again in 35mm., a more professional medium, after almost a third of the film was shot. For every foot of film that is actually used in a feature, it is normal practice to shoot ten or fifteen feet of film. De Palma was limited to shooting "Greetings" at an previously-impossible ratio of three to one. A standard feature takes eight to ten weeks to shoot; they did it in three. In order to make a successful film you've got to have skilled actors; yet De Palma succeeded with unknowns and amateurs. In planning a film, it is usually necessary to tailor it to an audience or market; De Palma and Hirsch had only their own critical standards in mind when they made the film and were willing to release it in any way possible, including showing it as a skin flick on 42nd Street, if necessary.

If all of this seems trivial, it is not; by ignoring technical and professional conventions in production, De Palma was able to make a film with total artistic freedom, breaking the conventions of content which characterize so much of American cinema. Though foreign film makers, especially Godard, have pioneered in the breaking of these conventions, De Palma is the first American to have adapted and improved upon their production techniques ("Breathless," one of the cheapest successful features ever made, cost \$90,000, nearly twice as much as "Greetings") and to have a wide commercial success.

Much of the technique used in the film is the result of the need to shoot the film as cheaply as possible. "Greetings" was a shot in long takes, cinema-verite style and then edited with

a profusion of jump cuts. De Palma goes beyond Godard in the use of jump-cutting by using it extensively to combine two different takes of the same scene, never hesitating to take advantage of the jarring effect of such a cut.

As is often the case in Godard films, De Palma uses the jump-cut to cover up mistakes in his shooting as well as for the effect itself, yet he is able to bring it off by using it as audaciously as possible. The scene of Paul, Jon and Lloyd talking about avoiding the draft in a psychedelic clothing store is remarkable: as they talk, the scene alternates between two customers in the store keep changing places and clothing. As the result of an error in the processing, of the print I saw, the alternation between takes was accompanied by a change in color in each take, heightening the psychedelic effect of the store and pointing the way for new possibilities for the jump-cut, though in this case the effect was unintentional.

At times, the image on the film is grainy as the result of blowing up as part of the original image on the film. Because of costs, De Palma was unable to retake incorrectly framed scenes on the film, he resorted to this lab technique to salvage his footage. By using this blow-up effect, the technique of the film echoes the theme of the spoof of "Blow-Up" which is in the film itself, though again, the effect was originally unintentional.

The shooting of the film was done entirely on location, in order to save money on studio costs. But an offshoot of this was greater realism which would have been impossible had "Greetings" been shot in a studio. Almost everything which cost limitations forced De Palma to use for his filming added to the realism and spontaneity of the film: Shooting on location, using non-professional actors and small shooting crews. Though he does not subscribe to Godard's fanatically mystical belief in realism, De Palma was gratified to find that "Greetings" had attained a noticeable degree of authenticity.

The technique in "Greetings" is evidence of a film maker who has total control of the medium. The editing, which De Palma did himself, show ingenuity, skill and audaciousness, whether it be in his use of jump-cuts or of seemingly standard slick cutting, as in the scene of Paul's seduction of Jon's following a girl in the park. In the shooting of the film, De Palma also shows evidence of a wide-ranging knowledge of varied film techniques, from the speeded-up silent-film style scene of Paul going to Whitehall to the spoof of TV Vietnam documentaries, from a continuing spoof of "Blow-Up" to a skillful parody of stag films.

"Greetings" is made up of several

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loosely connected episodes which deal with the preoccupations of three young men, Jon, Lloyd, and Paul. Most of what interests them is topical and somewhat transitory: the Vietnam war, the draft, computer dating. It is this very topical and yet ephemeral quality which makes "Greetings" unique: movies tend to ignore the topical humor used in magazines or television for fear that the film will become dated by the time it is released. Most American films take place in a nebulous time setting; it is only recently that criticism has been raised against such films as "The Graduate" and "Goodbye Columbia" for their failure to inject elements of topicality in order to add accuracy to the portrayal of characters.

If "Greetings" has one fault, it is an overemphasis on topical and realistic incidents at the expense of characterization. In the film each character becomes identified with one topic; as a

without any real depth to them. De Palma's skill as a director is to never let the film slow down enough for this flaw to become too apparent. There is a constant comic invention which keeps the film moving by injecting new characters and incidents. The minor characters in the film are truly excellent: whether it be the smut peddler, the girl who appears in the peep art sequence, or Mel Margulies playing himself.

The structure of the film permits a patchwork of episodes to be created by juxtaposing different scenes involving each of the main characters. Gerritt Graham's scenes at the beginning of the film are terrific. His constant rapping about ways of evading the draft and about his sexual adventures are funny in themselves but are also pure Gerritt: snotty, pompous, and overblown, and as a result, also quite funny. When he later gets involved in a sub-plot involving the Kennedy assassination, Gerritt is lost and is replaced by the character he portrays, Lloyd Clay. The sub-plot is saved by the introduction of Earl Roberts, a strange fanatic who makes a brief but very funny appearance. The scenes of computer dates are occasionally funny but rather banal, with the exception of "Bored Housewife" sequence.

The most successful treatment of a topic is in Jon's preoccupation of voyeurism. This is carefully developed from the moment he first becomes aware of it, through a series of incidents which show the progress of his perversion, to the moment where he changes his whole world in terms of voyeurism in the middle of the jungle of Vietnam. The truly outstanding scene is the filming of the "peep art" sequence; De Palma transforms the audience, as well as Paul, into voyeurs as they peer into a girl's window as she undresses. This scene best illustrates De Palma's feeling that that the nature of film is wrapped up with voyeurism on the part of the film maker and the audience.

The treatment of sex in the film is indicative of the whole atmosphere of "Greetings". Sex is always considered in a very natural way, often serving as the object of a funny scene, never with Hollywood's mock "artiness" which is often a cover for exploitation. What ultimately angered Hollywood and got "Greetings" an X rating was the unconventional way in which sex was treated in several scenes: the casual use of nudity in Gerritt's bullet racing scene where a girl is used as a dummy instead of as a sex object, the "Bored Housewife" stag film, and Gerritt's Barnard mixer rap. The only unconventional thing about all of these was the fact that Hollywood had never shown sex scenes which did not follow the heavy pant-pant formula of "adult films."

The quality of a film can often be gauged by the word of mouth it generates; here at Columbia, many people are talking about "Greetings," yet few have actually seen it. Any one who would like to see what film can really be like, fresh, funny and unconventional, should see "Greetings" when it opens again soon in the Village.

Those who have seen "Greetings" should wait impatiently for "Son of Greetings" As De Palma describes it, the film is about the black revolution but it is also about the foibles of society. De Palma is extremely enthusiastic about the script and foresees "Son of Greetings" as being more unified and even funnier than "Greetings". As the shooting on the film ends, De Palma is becoming even more enthusiastic and impatient to complete the editing and have it shown soon. Any one interested in seeing the work of one of this generation's most important directors should also share that impatience: