

Alan Swyer

aswyer@gmail.com

“AMBITION”

From the moment he started working in the movie business, Kriegel found himself obsessed with one particular aspect of Tinseltown lore. It wasn't sexual deviancy – who took on fifteen Marines, or had relations with a German shepherd – that interested him. Nor was it politics – whether the governmental or studio variety. And it certainly wasn't the trivia – what part was played by Lana Turner or Cameron Diaz's second cousin – that was prized by film geeks.

A stellar example of what tickled his fancy was the tale of the producer who made a point of seeing two psychiatrists in case one or the other was lying to him. Another was that of the proud father of an up-and-coming studio exec who, upon being introduced to a director considered to be *the flavor of the month*, reportedly exclaimed, “Do you know my daughter? She's the best blowjob in Hollywood?” To which Kriegel had come up with two imaginary replies: “I know,” and “How do you know?” Then there was the one he loved above all others, the legendary idiocy uttered by a TV exec after reading a pilot script: “A Martian wouldn't say that!” To which Kriegel's imaginary response was, “What would a Martian say?”

As Kriegel slowly ascended the Hollywood pecking order, rising from aspiring screenwriter toiling *on spec* with zero representation, to working writer with an agent and a couple of scripts optioned, and then to semi-seasoned pro with actual credits plus a series of writing assignments, he had two great ambitions.

The first, which he was happy to discuss with one and all – and on which he was far from alone – was to follow in the footsteps of people like Billy Wilder, Robert Rossen, Paul Mazursky, and Charlie Kaufman by making the leap from writer to director.

The second, which he kept largely to himself, was more arcane, and, he knew full well, far quirkier. Somehow, some way, he wanted to join the ranks of those considered to be the great contributors to the town's oral history.

The closest he came in his first years in the business owed to a German who had entered Kriegel's pantheon after marrying a studio head's daughter. When asked how a so-so actor whose only claim to fame was playing Nazis in World War II movies had managed to rise to producer, a wag exclaimed: “Of all the routes to success, Heintz Fuhrmann chose the vaginal.” In a meeting with Kriegel, whom he was trying to interest in what he called a *concept*, Fuhrmann explained ever so earnestly that he wanted a script that was, as he put it, “eretical and poetic.” “What if --” Kriegel replied with a straight face, “we change it to poetical and erotic?”

Though Kriegel got a fair share of kudos when his comment hit the street, to him the crack wasn't quite good enough. A grade of *B-* is what he felt it deserved, or at most a *B*. Which meant that he still had a long way to go.

When queried about lists – of desirable stars, directors, or screenwriters – studio executives have forever denied their existence. Yet Kriegel, from first-hand experience, knew otherwise.

Since his two biggest credits came from what are known as *bio-pics* – one about an early rock & roll star, the other about a Harlem playground basketball legend – the vast majority of the projects for which he received overtures involved, not surprisingly,

music or sports.

To keep from being pigeon-holed, but also because he was contrary by nature, Kriegel often stated that to venture into either of those areas again, the two realms would somehow have to be combined. Which meant, he usually added, a singing athlete or a musician who was black.

Though neither opportunity presented itself immediately, Kriegel did find ways in which to channel his energies in the two worlds that meant so much to him. First, thanks to an interest in at-risk youth, came a position on the Board of Directors of a baseball academy in Compton. Then, as a result of a series of articles he wrote for a British music magazine called “Blues & Rhythm,” an ever-increasing involvement in L.A.'s Blues and R&B scene, leading to friendships with the likes of Billy Preston and Solomon Burke, plus, for a while, dealings with Ike Turner.

Those kinships, in turn, paved the way for a relationship with a record company issuing re-releases. By writing essays and liner notes for albums such as “Ray Charles & Betty Carter,” “Big Joe Turner's Greatest Hits,” and “The Fiftieth Anniversary Of Doo-Wop,” Kriegel's stock with the label rose to the point where eventually he got to do some producing reissues for them, including a compilation of Ray Charles love songs.

While working on a indie film that was decidedly not a case of art for art's sake – a re-write on what purported to be a psychological thriller which, in its original incarnation was neither psychological nor thrilling – Kriegel was approached about a project that seemed too good to be true. Three guys who were trying to generate a movie about Duke Ellington – an ex-studio exec named Paul Sternberg, a former agent called Michael Fisher, and a composer with aspirations to produce known as Carlos Sanchez –

wanted him to come on-board to fashion a story.

Though flattered, since Ellington was one of his musical heroes, Kriegel knew enough to ask certain questions. The first was a tough one: Was there a market for such a film? To which he was given an answer that he readily accepted: “It might be uphill, but it was worth it.”

The second, which was in many ways more important, was simple and straightforward: Had the putative producers obtained the music rights? Without those, he understood full well, no film could get made, since who would want to see a Duke Ellington vehicle that didn't contain “Take The A Train,” “It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing),” “Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me,” or “I Got It Bad (And That Ain't Good)?” Moreover, mere access to the rights was insufficient without firmly established prices, since the cost could too easily prove to be prohibitive.

Assured by music maven Carlos Sanchez that all rights were in order, Kriegel's task was to come up with a satisfying narrative that could unfold in two hours of screen time minus, of course, the minutes needed for the key songs.

Never a fan of the biographies he termed *First-burp-to-last breath*, Kriegel hunted and searched for a storyline that would do justice to Duke Ellington's accomplishments, while also providing an emotional underpinning.

The solution, Kriegel came to believe after several days of wracking his brain, was to tell the tale through the eyes of Duke's son. Though a gifted musician, composer, and bandleader in his own right, Mercer Ellington never received what he felt was significant encouragement, support, or approval from his father, who always seemed far more open and generous toward proteges like Billy Strayhorn. Yet despite that Oedipal dynamic, which pleased Kriegel because of its dramatic opportunities, it was inevitably to

Mercer that the great man turned once his health began to fail.

The lengthy estrangement that father and son would have to overcome, as Kriegel saw it, was the ideal framing device for a script that could go back and forth in time. Death bed conversations between Duke and Mercer would provide the perfect trigger for flashbacks to key moments, both historical and dramatic. As a result, the music, instead of simply providing interludes, would be integrated into the storytelling, with many scenes set at rehearsals, concerts, recording sessions, and even during the band's “comeback” at the Newport Jazz Festival.

The three self-styled producers, whom Kriegel would eventually come to think of as *Manny, Moe, and Jack* after realizing that they were better suited for work at Pep Boys than in filmmaking, loved the approach. That led to Kriegel writing not one, but several drafts of a document known in the movie biz as a treatment.

The studio response, though largely glowing, led to a series of meetings in which potential stars and directors were discussed – thrilling the producers far more than Kriegel. Whereas the *three amigos* took every word of praise as a guarantee of future riches, Kriegel believed that in Hollywood there was no such thing as a bad meeting – just disappointing aftermaths.

Sadly, with “Duke & Mercer,” there were few aftermaths at all – just various degrees of silence.

Only when Michael Fisher, whose self-serving statements Kriegel had come to view with scorn, tried to put the blame on the treatment did the guy being treated as *only the writer, merely the writer, and maybe soon to be no longer the writer* at last make his feelings known.

“How many black films have the studios made recently that aren't about crime or gangs on the one hand, or silly comedies on the other?” Kriegel asked.

“So you're saying we shouldn't do this?” Fisher countered belligerently.

“Anything but. The fact is that character-driven pieces are now found first and foremost on cable.”

“So you want this to be nothing but a cable movie.”

“What I want is for the movie to get done,” replied Kriegel, whose basketball biopic, as Fisher knew full well, had been made for HBO.

“What if I say I'm not a cable producer?”

“Then based on zero credits, what kind of producer are you?”

Only because Paul Sternberg and Carlos Sanchez got between them did Kriegel and Fisher not come to blows.

Aware that losing Kriegel would mean losing the treatment, and that losing the treatment would almost certainly capsize the project, Paul Sternberg played peacemaker by initiating a series of what he called *bonding lunches*.

During these one-on-one sessions, which took place at ethnic joints favored by Kriegel – Indian, Ethiopian, regional Chinese, and even a deli renowned for its hand-carved pastrami – all sorts of topics were discussed. Though far from ignored, movies and the film business often gave way to chats about food, travel, books, politics, sports, and kids.

But what most intrigued Sternberg was Kriegel's deep immersion in black culture. After tiptoeing around the subject, on their third get-together Sternberg finally confronted, face on, what was clearly a mystery to him. “How did a white guy like you

discover – and get so deeply involved in – black music, food, history, and, for want of a better term, life?”

“I didn't.” Kriegel answered.

“B-but --”

“You don't *discover* things that have always been there,” Kriegel stated, explaining that his formative years were spent in a black section of Newark, New Jersey. There, he went on, he had two homes-away-from-home: a playground which provided an education in sports and girls, and a storefront soul food joint that housed a jukebox filled with the likes of Illinois Jacquet, Bullmoose Jackson, Big Maybelle, Wynonie Harris, and Louis Jordan.

When talk turned to racism in America, Kriegel surprised Sternberg even more by stating that he, himself, could probably be considered to some degree racist.

“Toward blacks?” asked a stunned Sternberg.

“Toward whites,” Kriegel responded, not entirely in jest.

Ten days later, Kriegel received a strange call from Paul Sternberg. “Is it true that you used to be a boxer?” he asked.

“What's that got to do with anything?”

“Fisher wants us to meet, but he's afraid you'll punch him out.”

“He didn't seem that way last time we were together.”

“Then he heard you once decked a director named Stu Franklin. And that you fought professionally.”

“Only amateur.”

“Still enough to scare the shit out of him,” Sternberg said.

Pleased to see Fisher nervous and chastened when the team met at a funky coffeehouse on Kriegel's side of town, the screenwriter cut off the preliminaries.

“So to what do I owe this pleasure?” he asked.

“Michael's got good news,” Sternberg said.

“Wendell Baptiste wants to be part of the team,” Fisher announced proudly, clearly expecting kudos.

“What does he bring to the table?” was Kriegel's muted response.

“He's a honcho in the music world not just in New York, but nationally,” Sanchez said.

“Internationally,” Fisher added.

“But what exactly does he bring?”

“He... umm... thinks he can help,” Sanchez offered.

“And I'm not supposed to ask how?”

The three others exchanged uncomfortable looks, then at last Sternberg broke the silence.

“I'd like to set up a conversation between the two of you,” Sternberg stated.

Four days later, Kriegel found himself on the phone with three disembodied voices. The first, redolent of New Orleans, was that of Wendell Baptiste. The other two, with unmistakable New York accents, belonged to Baptiste's manager and lawyer.

“What gives you the right to do something about Duke?” Baptiste asked aggressively after only the briefest moment of small talk.

“This your way of ingratiating?” Kriegel responded. “Maybe you ought to tell me

what your problem is.”

“What you gotta realize is that Duke, bottom line, is brother shit.”

“Which means?”

“Everything's ultimately about pussy.”

“And no white guy, brown guy, yellow guy, or red guy ever threw his life away over that?” asked Kriegel, giving himself an imaginary grade of *B+*. “Know what I think?”

“What's that?”

“Your father would be real embarrassed to hear you talk this way.”

“You don't know shit about my father.”

“What if I tell you someone close to me knows your father so well that she changed your dirty diapers?”

“Motherfucker, if you're lying, I'm gonna kick your ass.”

“Then tell me, who is Cora Boudreau?” Kriegel asked referring to someone who, in addition to being the mother of a friend of his, played jazz trumpet when women didn't do such things.

Suddenly there was no response, just dead silence.

“You there, Wendell?” Kriegel asked after a moment.

“I-I don't know what to say,” he muttered softly.

“How about starting with *I'm very sorry?*”

“Let's just move on,” Wendell mumbled.

“Not so fast. I did my diligence on you --”

“And what did you come up with?”

“That you're curator of the jazz museum.”

“Meaning?”

“No live music – only transcriptions.”

“I resent that.”

“But you didn't say it's not true. And by the way, with the cost of tickets at the Art Center where you preside, how many what you call *brothers* are in the audience?”

“Your point is made,” said one of the other people on the call, though Kriegel wasn't sure if it was the lawyer or manager. “So how do we proceed?”

“I think it's time for Wendell to do some diligence on me,” Kriegel replied. “Got a second line, Wendell?”

“Why?”

“Because I want you to put me on hold and call (213) 737-8000.”

“And who am I supposed to ask for?”

“Mr. C.”

Suddenly the man who had been heard from the least spoke up. “Wendell, for Chrissake tell the man you're sorry.”

“Why?”

“Because that's Ray Charles's number.”

In a business where instead of saying *No*, people simply say nothing, projects that fail to find a home swiftly almost inevitably wind up fading away.

That seemed to be the case for the Duke Ellington project as, over a period of time, Kriegel's phone went from ringing frequently, to occasionally, then ultimately not at all.

Though he would have preferred a deal thanks to all the time and effort he put in,

Kriegel was able to take some solace in the knowledge that his conversation with Wendell had surprising resonance.

Since Wendell Baptiste was not exactly beloved in certain circles, word spread with surprising speed. Some of it owed to Kriegel, who was sufficiently irritated to tell a few friends what was said. But interesting, even more of the chatter seemed to percolate from the East Coast, which meant that it was likely leaked by Wendell's manager, lawyer, or both.

The result was that in addition to calls from people he knew, Kriegel found himself being approached repeatedly by strangers – in restaurants, coffeehouses, and even airports – all of whom cited lines about Wendell's dirty diapers, or being “curator of the jazz museum,” or especially about guys throwing their lives away over pussy.

Having finally reached his goal of becoming a director – with a thriller, a couple of music videos, and a documentary under his belt – Kriegel was surprised to get a call one afternoon a couple of years later from Paul Sternberg.

“The guys and I have been wondering,” Sternberg said after a moment of chitchat. “Still think cable's the right home for the Duke project?”

“I've felt that way since Day One.”

“Mind setting up meetings for us?”

“Thought your main man Fisher's not a cable producer.”

“Fuck him.”

“Can I get that in English?”

“I should've listened to you from the beginning.”

“No argument from me,” Kriegel said. “Except that rules have changed.”

“How so?”

“Where once, especially in the eyes of Fisher, I was *only the writer, merely the writer, and almost no longer the writer --*”

“Yeah?”

“I've added a hyphen.”

“Meaning?”

“Writer-director. Which shouldn't disturb you unless Fisher has some director he wants to bring on-board.”

“Well --”

“Then thanks, but no thanks.”

“But I thought this was a passion project for you.”

“Which is why I'm determined to protect it.”

“I just don't know,” Sternberg said.

“About what?”

“Whether the others'll buy in.”

“Then they'll have to be satisfied with their other deals.”

“What other deals?”

“You tell me,” Kriegel said, making his point.

Two weeks later, Team Ellington, as it was dubbed by Sternberg in his role as peacemaker, arrived for a meeting at a cable company. With Kriegel, as writer-director, serving as spokesman, the Duke project received a reception unlike any before.

“We've been looking for a music-based film,” an exec named Richard Prince stated after hearing the pitch. “Seems to me this it.”

Casting was discussed, and so too were location and tentative shooting schedules. Then, after goodbyes were exchanged, another of the executives present – Lauren Hyde – raised another issue.

“What about the music?” she asked.

“What about it?” Michael Fisher replied.

“Do you have the rights?”

Immediately, all eyes focused on Carlos Sanchez.

“Yes,” Sanchez responded softly.

“Yes?” asked Lauren Hyde. “Or yes, *yes*.”

Turning away from Sanchez, Lauren Hyde faced Kriegel. “Which songs do you need?” she inquired.

Kriegel promptly listed the titles he'd discussed during his first meeting with Manny, Moe, and Jack: “Take The A Train,” “It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing),” “Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me,” or “I Got It Bad (And That Ain't Good.”

“Perfect,” responded Richard Prince. “How much?”

“Not too much,” was Sanchez's answer.

“And how much is not too much?”

“Well, it's really to be determined,” said Sanchez with a shrug.

“To be determined?” Kriegel blurted out.

“It'll be taken care of,” Sternberg chimed in.

“*Be* taken care of?” Kriegel demanded. “What did I ask the first time we met?”

“Not now,” Fisher said.

“What did you say?”

“It's not your problem,” Fisher stated assertively.

“If *it's* not my problem,” replied Kriegel angrily, “then *you* are.”

With tensions rising, Fisher's bluster quickly dissipated under Kriegel's glare.

“Hey --” he said.

“Hey, my ass!”

To the dismay of all those assembled, Kriegel rose and started to the door – only to be followed by Fisher.

“If we get past this,” Fisher whispered, “we could finally have a deal.”

“*If?* If my aunt had balls, she'd be my uncle!” Kriegel bellowed, not realizing, as he left, that though he had largely wasted his time – and indeed might never join the likes of Orson Welles, Ernst Lubitch, and Howard Hawks in the pantheon of filmmakers – at least his response, once it hit the street, would be forever enshrined in the highest ranks of Hollywood lore, to which he had so long aspired.

The grade he gave himself was an *A+*.