Edgar G. Ulmer

Bogdanovich

EDGAR G. ULMER*

I really am looking for absolution for all the things I had to do for money's sake.—EDGAR G. ULMER

Nobody ever made good films faster or for less money than Edgar Ulmer. What he could do with nothing—occasionally in the script department as well—remains an object lesson for directors who complain about tight budgets and schedules. That Ulmer could also communicate a strong visual style and personality with the meager means so often available to him is close to miraculous. But he did—and more than once: Detour (*1946*), The Black Cat (*1934*), Ruthless (*1948*),

* Interview with Peter Bogdanovich, February 1970. Copyright © 1974 by Peter Bogdanovich. A longer version of this interview appears in *Film Culture*, Nos. 58–60.

The Naked Dawn (*1955*), Bluebeard (*1944*) *are just the first that come to mind.*

He had been a kind of legendary figure for years when I decided to look him up in early 1970. We met for our first session on February 2. He was recovering from a stroke that had for a while deprived him of speech and of the power in his legs, but he had struggled back and by the time I saw him he had but a slight limp and only minor difficulties with words. His recovery was as much a miracle against heavy odds as some of his best pictures. Though almost seventy, he was also anything but an invalid in mind or body, was involved in several projects, with plenty of time and advice for students, and generous to me with his energy. He had humor and passion and a kind of demonic charm. We had three sessions in February, and then my work on The Last Picture Show *took me away for almost a year. We spoke several times on the telephone but before we could meet again to finish the interview, another stroke paralyzed him. He never walked or spoke again although he could understand everything that was said to him, could nod, or shake his head. That must have only made it worse for such an active man. I never saw him again. He died a year later.*

PETER BOGDANOVICH: You've really been working a long time in pictures.

EDGAR G. ULMER: Oh, yes, a very long time. If I would tell you my start in pictures, you would laugh yourself sick. I was in Berlin with Reinhardt in 1919. I met [F. W.] Murnau's closest friend, Rochus Gliese, a wonderful stage designer and a motion-picture director. He and Paul Wegener were planning to make a picture called *The Golem*—the first one. When summer came it meant no work for us at the theatre because we were laid off for two months. Gliese said, "Why don't you come and work on the picture?" This was the time of unbelievable inflation. So I said, "What kind of a job? You have a designer—Professor Pelitzer." So he said, "Can you cut silhouettes?" I said, "What kind of a question is that?" He said, "Every shot I make I want shot through a cutout. If it's a love scene, I want to shoot through a heart—in silhouette—if it's trees, through a window." So my job was to sit on the set next to the camera and cut silhouettes, mattes, which the director wanted before the lens. Two weeks later I was building sets, because Pelitzer didn't care. But my start was as a silhouette cutter—and we invented some tricks. Remember the sequence where the magic girls dance on the lake? That was a huge problem. How in the Lord's name are you going to make girls dance on the water? I discovered a way of doing it. We drove

piles into the bottom of the lake and we put two-by-fours, which we painted black, into the lake. But unfortunately we used the girls from the Prague Opera House—very hefty Czechoslovakian broads—and when they jumped, they broke the goddamn boards! They were sinking. We had to get iron cantilevers to put into the boards; we hadn't figured how heavy these Czechoslovakian broads would be.

It was an unbelievable time to make pictures. France had a wonderful comedian called Max Linder. He was a French Harold Lloyd. His two-reel comedies were at that time German-French coproductions. So I painted on the floor a whole six- or seven-story house he was to climb over. Maurice Stiller came to Berlin and saw that painted house on the floor and hired me to make the *Gösta Berling Saga* with him in Stockholm—that was Garbo's first picture. I also did the sets of *Street of Sin* [1927] for her for G. W. Pabst. It was entirely different then from the way we make pictures today. Then you had to do everything. Everything.

PB: You were saying you worked with Lubitsch when he was an assistant director?

EGU: Yah. In the unit.

PB: What did you do in the theatre before that?

EGU: I was designer and assistant to Professor Reinhardt, just as Preminger was much later.

PB: How long were you with Reinhardt?

EGU: I was with Reinhardt three years.

PB: And what had you done before that?

EGU: Before that I took my schooling at the Burg Theater in Vienna.

PB: And you always wanted to be in the theatre as a child?

EGU: Yes. I was a child actor, too.

PB: And after your schooling you immediately worked with Reinhardt?

EGU: Yes. I was considered quite a kid at that time because Reinhardt should be the *end* of a career—a climax—not for a boy.

PB: According to your biography you became a designer for Decla-Bioscop in 1918 so you must have been an infant in the theatre.

EGU: Sure. I was still in school.

PB: I see, while you were still going to school. And is that where you worked with Lang?

EGU: No, that was later at UFA.

PB: After you finished with Reinhardt?

EGU: No, during Reinhardt, and I worked with Murnau because Murnau and Dieterle were both actors at Reinhardt's. Dieterle we called the

worked w/ Reinhardt in theatre &
w/ Lubitsch, Lang, Murnau

Iron Stove because he was a very tall guy, not talented, but whenever we needed somebody in armor he had to play these parts, so we had a department called the Iron Stoves. We were very vicious kids as you can imagine.

PB: Was Dieterle a good director?

EGU: No, he wore white gloves and his wife was all day on the stage with him . . . saying, "William, it's enough—now you must rest" . . . and she brought him eyeshades so he could sleep on the set.

PB: What did you work with Lang on?

EGU: *Metropolis* [1926], *Die Niebelungen* [1924], and then I worked with him later, in 1929, on a film called *The Spies* (*Spione*), a classic picture. By the way, something very funny: from 1925 till 1927 Lang and Murnau had two American-English speaking people—for the subtitles—one was Joe Mankiewicz, the second one was Hitchcock. Hitchcock learned his trade under Fritz Lang.

PB: Did you get along with Lang?

EGU: Not at all. Because on the set he was the incarnation of the Austrian who became a Prussian general. A sadist of the worst order you can imagine. He was a great picture maker who fortunately married the best scenario writer in Germany, Thea von Harbou. I also worked later with him on *M* [1932] for Seymour Nebenzal.

PB: Were you only working as a designer?

EGU: No, I was really Bild Regisseur. At that time, up to the coming of sound, there were *two* directors in each picture: a director for the dramatic action and for the actors, and then the director for the picture itself who established the camera angles, camera movements, etc.; there had to be teamwork.

PB: And you yourself were in charge of that?

EGU: Yah. With Murnau I invented a new role called "production design," which meant the designing of each and every angle. Our sets were built in perspective with rising or sloping floors. Everything was constructed through the viewfinder. So what happened was you could only take one shot in that set if you had a room. If there were ten shots of it, you built ten sets of that one room. Because the one eye was the point of the perspective, the furniture was built in perspective. That's where the great look of the pictures came from. It gave you, of course, a completely controlled style. When you look at the old UFA pictures today, you're startled how precise each and every shot is.

PB: Because a set was built for each one.

EGU: Yes, Fritz Lang was a designer too, as you know. He designed

perspective sets

advertising posters when he came to Berlin. Lang had an unbelievable energy and stick-to-itiveness; you could never stop him. He saw the picture. Nothing could distract him, he would do it fifty times. So did Murnau. When we came in and saw the rushes at night, Murnau used to get up when the light went on again and say, "Now we know how *not* to do it."

PB: And did it all over again?

EGU: Everything over again. We had worked on and off practically two years on Lang's two *Niebelungen* pictures. It was the time of the greatest inflation. We cut the picture, the premiere was set for the UFA Palace, a theatre that seated 3,000 people. At that time the dollar was 700,000 marks. The night when we opened the picture, Lang carried it, reel by reel, to the theatre because he was still cutting. When the second reel was running, he was cutting the third reel. Meanwhile [Frank] Kellogg, the great American diplomat, had worked all day with the German government and that night the gold mark was born. Seven hundred thousand marks were really one gold mark. Result: the picture cost UFA and Mr. Lang not a penny. That was Lang's luck.

PB: And you worked with Murnau on *Faust* [1926] and *The Last Laugh* [1924]?

EGU: *The Last Laugh*. The first picture I made with him was in Yugoslavia . . . *The Finances of the Grand Duke* [1924]. We photographed at Fiume in Spoleto. A very strange picture.

PB: You continued to work with Murnau when he came to America?

EGU: Yes, Junior Laemmle [Carl] loaned me to him.

PB: That was on *Sunrise* [1927], *Four Devils* [1928], and *City Girl* [1930].

EGU: Yes, but the only picture which Murnau himself counted was *Sunrise*.

PB: Was it made with the same kind of sets?

EGU: Yes, that's when we forced Winnie Sheehan to accept the idea and do it in perspective. They had to buy Fox Studios in Westwood because we didn't have enough space down on Western Avenue.

PB: Did you ever use perspective sets on any of your later pictures?

EGU: Yes, yes. I used it at PRC on *The Wife of Monte Cristo* [1946], *St. Benny the Dip* [1951], and *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday* [1929]).

PB: You designed *People on Sunday*?

EGU: No, codirected and produced. [Robert] Siodmak was the other director. Fred Zinnemann was the camera assistant [Eugene] Schuftan was

the cameraman—the first time that he ever operated the camera—and Billy Wilder wrote the script—on pieces of scratch paper in the Romanische Café—his first script. It was quite an achievement.

PB: How did you all get together on a thing like that?

EGU: I organized it. I had $5,000 that I had brought from America. I saw a picture made by a Russian director, Dziga-Vertov, called *The Man With the Camera* [1929] and was tremendously taken with the thing because it was photographed in Kiev, in streetcars, in actual houses—no sets built—and done not with actors but with real people—the idea De Sica had twenty years later.

PB: Are you still friendly with any of the German directors that you knew then, like Preminger?

EGU: No. Preminger, I could never accept. You must understand that German film and theatre had two groups. One was the romantic, let me say, art-possessed group; the other was the group to whom theatre and film was a business. Now there are very few still alive from the first group, and we have scattered all over. It's a very, very sad life now, because the real people, most of my friends, are in the Eastern Zone of Berlin. [Bertolt] Brecht drew them over there with him. I would not go across the line into East Berlin. The first time I came back after the war, I was warned not to go over. So one night Brecht's two daughters finally cornered me in the West in a park, and we sat and talked about their father, and would I come over? Then he died and I didn't get to go across to his funeral, which I, of course, found pretty horrible.

PB: How would you rate those directors if you were historically looking at each of their work? Do you think Murnau is the greatest?

EGU: Yes. Murnau was the greatest because he had Carl Mayer, the writer. Because Murnau was really a man who had the camera up there, a man who saw pictures and who built pictures in his head. Lang was very powerful too. He had a rotten personality—selfish and egotistical—but a great picture maker. At the same time, Jacques Feyder, who also did most of his work, not in Paris, but in Berlin, was a fantastic picture maker.

PB: Did you actually work with Hitchcock at UFA?

EGU: No.

PB: What was it like coming over here to do *Sunrise*?

EGU: I came in 1924 to finish up my work on *Miracle at Offenberg*. Then I worked for Martin Beck for six months until Carl Laemmle came after me. Stroheim was making *Merry-Go-Round* and wanted me as his art director. So I made a contract with Carl Laemmle and broke my contract with Beck,

which I could do because they had made a mistake. I wasn't of age—I was a boy, twenty years old.

PB: You weren't allowed to sign contracts?

EGU: No. You must be twenty-one. So, Mr. Untermeyer, the lawyer, got me out of this, and I got a contract with Laemmle, which was a "catchall" contract—assistant art director and production assistant—to learn how to direct. So I started, then after six months of designing, I became an assistant director with Willy Wyler and that whole bunch out there.

PB: At Universal?

EGU: I stayed with Universal for many years.

PB: But you never directed there?

EGU: Oh, yes, doing Westerns, a whole flock of them. Then I did *The Black Cat*.

PB: Yes, later, but I mean the silent days.

EGU: In the silent days, I directed Westerns.

PB: Were they any good?

EGU: They must have been very strange. In fact, they were very funny. There were two Western streets—on the upper part of one, Willy worked, on the lower part of the street, I worked. When Willy used the horses and the cowboys, I had to do close-ups in my picture. Then when I ran out of close-ups, *I'd* get the horses. We each made twenty-four of those a year. We had the following schedule: Monday and Tuesday you wrote your script and prepared the production; Wednesday and Thursday you shot; Friday you cut; and Saturday you went to Tijuana gambling with the old man.

PB: What was the first of those pictures you directed? Do you remember any titles?

EGU: No, who can? I made so many of them. It was something like *The Border Sheriff*, that's all I recall.

PB: You remember what year it was?

EGU: Yes, 1925.

PB: My God, I didn't know you were directing that early. How many years were you doing those things?

EGU: I did Westerns up until about August '26, when they loaned me to Murnau.

PB: Murnau had come over here and asked for you?

EGU: Yes.

PB: Were you Stroheim's art director on *Merry-Go-Round*?

EGU: Yes, but Stroheim got fired—Rupert Julian finished the picture.

PB: Did you finish the picture with him?

worked w/ William Wyler,
worked at Universal
(Laemmle)

EGU: Yes. I stayed on.

PB: How did you get along with Stroheim?

EGU: Magnificent—I loved Stroheim. The man invented his own characters—everything. He did a tremendous amount of reading. He himself was a very strange character. In the year 1917 Uncle Carl at Universal was sold by one of the directors of the time (I don't know who it was) a script, which Stroheim, who was a costume man at Western Costume, had written. The title of the script was *The Kaiser—the Beast of Berlin*, an American propaganda film. Stroheim was the first wardrobe man—he knew the Austrian-German uniforms, he knew the American uniforms, and at that moment he decided he wanted to become a director. He also played a German general in the picture. And the following day he appeared with a monocle in his eye and stopped Carl Laemmle on the street and told him what a wonderful director he was. He had directed pictures in Berlin, in Vienna, and he sold Carl Laemmle on making a picture which would be something like eighteen hours long called *Foolish Wives* [1922]. He started to build all of Vienna and Monte Carlo on the back lot at Universal. He could be nasty and he could be a sadist, but he knew pictures. He could see a film, could visualize it.

PB: Are the history books correct—that Murnau was the first one who moved the camera so extensively?

EGU: And built. When you talk about Murnau, you must talk about his best friend who collaborated with him—a very fine director, Rochus Gliese, whom he brought to this country on *Sunrise*. Gliese was my partner, a fantastic designer and camera builder.

PB: Do you remember how the idea came to move the cameras so extensively?

EGU: Yes. It was just before *The Last Laugh*. We really had one thing to sell on *Last Laugh*, which was Emil Jannings' face. Now, Carl Mayer wrote in the script about how the camera was on top of Jannings when he walked through that lobby and got into the elevator, which should be one shot. Murnau then added to what Mayer wanted. He said it was important to be on the face. And Murnau had insisted, "No subtitles." There wasn't one.

PB: So, before the picture was shot, it was decided not to have titles.

EGU: Of course, *before*. When that decision was made, he said that there was only one way to tell the story—with his eyes and by staying with him all the time. At that time we didn't have telescopic cameras or lenses. We had 50 mm., which was *the* thing—we didn't know about the 75 and

everything up to 1,000 now. So Murnau finally turned to Gliese and to me, and said, "Isn't there a way to do it?" So we huddled with Karl Freund who was the cameraman—not the actual cameraman, but the supervisor of photography—Gunther Rittau was the actual cameraman. And we walked down the Kurfürstendam to have dinner. A woman with twins in a baby buggy was rolling along, and I suddenly stopped and said, "What's going to stop us from putting the camera on the buggy?" We tried and tried, and we built the first dolly. What the dolly couldn't do! We laid things out for it. We didn't have rolls of film long enough. We had to go to AGFA and convince them to *cut* film for us.

PB: They were only four hundred feet long?

EGU: Two hundred feet! And we needed about seven hundred feet. The stopwatches! What went on with that thing! And when we finally saw the shot, we didn't know how we did it. Everybody was so tense. This was the tenacity of Murnau. He actually had a metronome next to him just to set the pace.

PB: *Sunrise* was also done with very long takes?

EGU: Sure. The script of *Sunrise*—I think I have it still in storage—Herman Bing and I translated it from German. Mayer had written it like poetry—one shot on every page. The language—the most unbelievable love went into that thing.

PB: Did you ever work with Lubitsch?

EGU: Oh yes, sure, here at Warner Brothers.

PB: What did you do with him?

EGU: Art director. I did for him *Lady Windermere's Fan* [1925]. I did Heidelberg for his *The Student Prince* [1927]—at Metro.

PB: Did you like him?

EGU: I loved Lubitsch, mainly for his tremendous desire to make something funny with class.

PB: He was a great director.

EGU: He was. It was strange—he really should have been a Frenchman.

PB: He was the least German of any of the directors. What was your first film in Hollywood?

EGU: *Mr. Broadway*. But it was New York, not Hollywood. It was 1932.

PB: How did you get the chance to direct that?

EGU: I worked with De Mille on *The King of Kings* [1927], made huge miniatures of the Crucifixion with a cameraman by the name of Walter Lang. He went back to New York. He owned a tremendous optical house. I

was called by him to New York, and he had put the thing together with a laboratory. That's how I got to direct.

PB: Was *Mr. Broadway* a comedy? I never saw it.

EGU: No, it was a very serious picture. Ed Sullivan was in it—he was the big star.

PB: He was "Mr. Broadway"?

EGU: Yeah. That was his column.

PB: And how did you like the picture?

EGU: Didn't like it at all, because Sullivan forced it into one of these moonlight-and-pretzel things. It was a nightmare, a mixture of all kinds of styles.

PB: And you were unable to control the picture?

EGU: Unable. The laboratory controlled the picture.

PB: And how did you make *Damaged Lives* [1933]?

EGU: That was also very strange. Jack Cohn of Columbia got in a fight with his brother, Harry. Jack was in charge of sales in New York and was very angry and very jealous that he couldn't produce like Harry. Mr. Walter Wanger, at that time, was one of the producers at the new Columbia, which had become very rich overnight. The fight between the brothers was over Wanger, and they decided not to talk to each other anymore. And Jack Cohn, whom I knew very well, brought up the subject one night. He had to make pictures himself. He went back to New York and called me. We met the Canadian health minister who needed a picture for Canada. He told me about a play by [Eugène] Brieux called *Damaged Goods*, translated by Bernard Shaw. It was a huge success before the First World War—came out in the period of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*—I knew that play and I said I could make a picture out of it. Jack and Harry had another brother named Nat, the born schlemiel of the family. He was in charge of the shipping room and was kicked out because he couldn't understand why he should be in the shipping room when his two other brothers were the president and vice-president of the studio. So I had to agree to take Nat as my producer. I wrote a script, the Canadian health minister was delighted. He didn't know a thing about pictures. I came back to the Coast and shot it. Harry, because he was fighting with his brother Jack, wouldn't let me on the Columbia lot. I had to go to General Service Studios, and I made the picture there in eight days.

PB: My God! And who released it?

EGU: *Columbia!* And it made a fortune. At that time the picture made

$1,800,000, played ten weeks at the Central Theatre on Broadway. Harry Cohn never forgave me for that. I was the bad boy. I never worked for Harry himself. It's a story against syphilis.

PB: Was it a good film—did you ever see it again?

EGU: Yes. Yes, I saw it again. An excellent film, really very good.

PB: You made it so quickly.

EGU: Most of my PRC pictures were made in six days. Just try to visualize it—eighty setups a day.

PB: Really? I once did forty and almost died. How can you do eighty?

EGU: Ask my wife—she's my script supervisor. I was known all over town. I could have gone anywhere, but I was under exclusive contract. There would come a time around four o'clock in the afternoon when I would say, "Aces wild, we go into a PRC hour now, I'll give the numbers." But I had a perfect technique worked out. No set of mine existed in these pictures where one wall was not without any paintings, without anything, just a plain wall in gray. I shot my master scene, but left for the last day the close-ups. They would play against that one flat, blank wall, and I would say "camera left," "camera right." They would say two sentences, I would hold my hand in front of the lens not to stop the camera, and he would go into the second speech, because I couldn't afford to go through. I had to cut with the camera, because I was only allowed 15,000 feet for a feature. No more. Two to one, nothing more.

PB: So you didn't even bother to slate. You put your hand in.

EGU: Yes. I laughed when I came over to Italy to make my first picture and they bragged about their fast slates. Because in the beginning, when they didn't have the raw stock, they wouldn't spend more than two feet. I laughed. I said, "You think that's fast?" I showed them how to do it.

PB: You must have also shot many things with long master scenes without cutting.

EGU: Of course. The crews used to do something very funny to me. In every studio where I worked in the forties, they put a sign on the camera, on the magazine: Ulmer Short Line.

PB: Because you were moving so much?

EGU: I had to have my own dolly grips, whom I carried from picture to picture with me. And I took the same thing to Italy. When I did *The Pirates of Capri* [1949] there, I laid a track of four hundred feet for a master scene on the beach, and from that time on there was only one expression: "Una piccola carrella."

PB: A short rail.

EGU: Just a short rail, just a short one.

PB: Anyway, *The Black Cat* was the next film you directed?

EGU: Yeah.

PB: I think it's one of your best.

EGU: Yah. But a lot of credit must be given to Junior Laemmle on that picture.

PB: Why?

EGU: Junior was a very dear friend of mine, and a very young man. Under the influence of [Lewis] Milestone and the so-called intellectual crew with whom Junior palled around, which means his two cousins, the Wylers, William and Bob [Kuhlman] Henickson, and me a little bit, Junior had made, against all advice from his father, *All Quiet on the Western Front* [1930], which became an unbelievable success. I was very much taken by a German writer of the time called Fallada, who was very much like Remarque, only younger. And I sold Junior on an idea to make his book, *Little Man, What Now?* So Junior found himself in the intellectual picture making. So when I came to him with the idea of *The Black Cat*, which would employ Lugosi and Karloff at the same time in the same picture, because each one had been successful, Junior gave me free rein to write a horror picture in the style we had started in Europe with *Caligari* [1919]. And he gave me my head for the first time. He was a very, very strange producer; he didn't have much education, but had great respect for intelligence and for creative spirit.

PB: You didn't have anything to do with directing *Little Man, What Now* [1934]? That was Frank Borzage.

EGU: Very good picture—I built the sets for it.

PB: *The Black Cat* has really very little to do with the Edgar Allan Poe story—just the title.

EGU: Nothing. The Edgar Allan Poe story is not a story you can dramatize.

PB: Why did you supposedly base it on that—for commercial reasons?

EGU: It was Junior's idea.

PB: Just for the title and name?

EGU: Yah.

PB: Where did you get the idea of the castle being built on the graveyard of a battlefield and all that?

EGU: That came out many years before. I had been in Prague, as I

told you, and had worked on *The Golem* [1920]. I met at that time Gustav Meyrinck, the man who wrote *Golem* as a novel. Meyrinck was one of these strange Prague Jews, like Kafka, who was very much tied up in the mystic Talmudic background. We had a lot of discussions, and Meyrinck at that time was contemplating a play based upon Doumont, which was a French fortress the Germans had shelled to pieces during the First World War. There were some survivors who didn't come out for years. And the commander was a strange Euripides figure who went crazy three years later when he was brought back to Paris, because he had walked on that mountain of bodies. And I thought it was a subject that was quite important. And that feeling was in the air in the twenties.

PB: Was that the original idea for the picture and you worked backward from there?

EGU: Well, I wanted to write a novel really, because I did not believe the literature after the war and during the war, on both sides. In Germany and in England, it was very much the heroic thing. And where enemies were fiends like you never saw before. I couldn't believe that. Therefore I took two men who knew each other and who fought their private war during the time that capitalism flourished. I thought it was quite a story stylistically. I had a wonderful cameraman, and Junior let me do the sets and everything at the same time.

PB: *The Black Cat* had a remarkable visual strength.

EGU: It was very, very much out of my Bauhaus period.

PB: How did you get along with Karloff and Lugosi?

EGU: Very well. Karloff was a very charming man.

PB: I knew him. Yes, he was.

EGU: Very charming. And he never took himself seriously. My biggest job was to keep him in the part, because he laughed at himself. Not the Hungarian, of course.

PB: Not Lugosi?

EGU: No. You had to cut away from Lugosi continuously, to cut him down. But there was the huge success of *Dracula* [1931] on film, and on stage.

PB: Of course, Karloff had a big success too, but I suppose he was more intelligent.

EGU: Karloff happened to have been English, that's the marvelous thing. After all, I worked with the man after his gigantic success in *Frankenstein* [1931]. One of the nicest scenes I had with him, he lies in bed next to the

daughter of Lugosi, and the young couple rings down at the door, and he gets up and you see him the first time in costume, in that modernistic set. I explained the scene to him and he said, "Aren't you ashamed to do a thing like that—that has nothing to do with acting?" So I told him to be nice and do it, and he never took himself seriously—he got into bed, we got ready to shoot, and he got up, he turned to the camera, after he put his shoes on, and said "Boo!" Every time I had him come in by the door, he would open the door and say, "Here comes the heavy . . ." He was a very, very lovely man.

PB: And a good actor.

EGU: Yes, a very fine actor. Five star. As you know, he lisped—but the way he used that lisp—he knew exactly how to overcome the handicap.

PB: What was it that particularly excited you about making that film?

EGU: The stylistic thing, of course.

PB: Was the picture successful?

EGU: Yah. It started a whole cycle. And Universal didn't make a cycle if it wasn't successful.

PB: And then you went from that to a couple of Yiddish films, didn't you?

EGU: Yes. And I had a very favorite script, a play that [Peretz] Hirshbein wrote called *Greene Felde* (*Green Fields* [1937]).

PB: Why was Jacob Ben-Ami your codirector?

EGU: I didn't speak the language. Also, nearly fifteen years before, Ben-Ami played the lead in *Greene Felde*. Hirshbein insisted I couldn't make the picture if Ben-Ami didn't play the lead. The night before I started shooting I got Ben-Ami out by giving him the co-credit.

PB: Who played the lead?

EGU: The leads were played by Helen Beverley and Michael Goldstein, a very fine actor from the Art Theatre.

PB: Believe it or not, I've seen the picture, and it's quite good.

EGU: It's very good! It was one of the nicest comedies I ever made, but with a very strong philosophic background. In Paris in 1938 the picture got the Best Foreign Picture award.

PB: What happened between *The Black Cat* [1934] and *Greene Felde* [1937]—you didn't direct a picture?

EGU: Oh, yes I did.

PB: What did you do?

EGU: *Thunder over Texas*. I had to make Westerns again to live. I used the name of John Warner.

PB: Why did you do that?

EGU: I didn't want the Western credit. I did four.

PB: Four Westerns, and all as John Warner . . . amazing. You remember the titles?

EGU: No. Not anymore. These were jobs where you got $300 for directing a picture.

PB: These were not one-reelers?

EGU: Features! Shot in five days and five nights.

PB: Well, I think I can find out the names by looking up the credits of John Warner, maybe.

EGU: No. There were other names. We all had given names on these things. I didn't know what was going on, only that I was given a script, not even a script—two pages—and I went out.

PB: Incredible. And then *Green Fields* was the first picture you took credit for again as director?

EGU: No, no. *Natalka Poltavka* [1937], the Ukrainian picture.

PB: What's the title in English?

EGU: The same—it's a city in the Ukraine.

PB: Where did you make that?

EGU: In New York.

PB: And *Green Fields* was made in New York, also?

EGU: Yes.

PB: Where did you shoot the exteriors for *Natalka Poltavka*?

EGU: In New Jersey, never in the studio.

PB: Was that very simple in the way you shot it?

EGU: Very simple. Also very pastoral.

PB: And after that you did *The Singing Blacksmith* (*Yankel Dem Schmidt* [1938]) for the Yiddish Theatre with the same company?

EGU: Yah.

PB: With Jacob Ben-Ami?

EGU: No, Ben-Ami was out. I was able to take over everything myself because *Green Fields* was such a huge success. On *The Singing Blacksmith*, we again had to find a location. Now, you must understand, this was when the Bund was riding high in New York and New Jersey. My staff and I had to build a home for the *Blacksmith*, an entire "shtetl," or little Jewish village, a ghetto town. And next to it, of course, I had to build the Ukrainian backgrounds. The problem was how to find a piece of land without telegraph poles and without roads. It was an unbelievable assignment. I started off with my staff in a station wagon in May, because we were supposed to shoot the end of June. Up in Westchester County we found some big

estates, but the moment we started to talk about a Yiddish picture and a Ukrainian picture—nix, out. So we had combed all of New York State, and it was so powerful; you must understand the budgets were practically nothing. So I decided we had to go back to Jersey. We couldn't go on the farm because I wouldn't stand for it. They had the Avremkov farm in *Natalka Poltavka* and I wasn't going to repeat myself. I also knew we couldn't afford a generator for the lights, so I worked out a system where I had to stay on the highlines, it had to be on the electric highlines, because all I could afford was to throw a pig—a transformer—into it. I finally made a contact with City Service in New Jersey and traveled with their plans along the highlines to find the place. My big staff consisted of two boys and four old Jews, in a station wagon we had bought for $110, an old woodie, today maybe worth money even. So the first week in June, I was on the way to Newton, New Jersey, and we followed a dirt road because we always had to be on the main line; and we came to a fantastic piece of land with a lake, everything one could wish for, because I had insisted on finding a sloping ground because I needed the perspective. We tried to find the main farm or somebody we could talk to. After driving for about half an hour we came to the main road and the manor house. It was a monastery—so you can imagine how we felt! But now comes the strange thing. This was a Friday. I went up to the main door in the building—the Jews kept sitting in the station wagon, frightened. On the door hung a sign that said: *Clausura.* I had gone to a Jesuit university so I knew what it meant. The Benedictine monks, all monks, have one day in the week that is called *clausura* when they are not allowed to talk and nobody can speak to them. Now I thought, with all that, what the heck is gonna happen? I saw a little chapel; the door was open so I walked in. There was a monk praying on the altar. I decided I had to face it out. When the monk finished, he came out and I saw by his soutane that he was a dignitary in that setup. He had a big red beard. He asked what he could do for me. So I told him my sad story, that I was looking for a motion-picture location, and he became very interested. I noticed he had a heavy German accent. He introduced himself, took me to his office in the main building and told me he was the prior of the whole monastery. Within two minutes we were talking German. He told me he was head of the monastery in Munich five or six years ago. So I sat in his office, and he told me he could talk with me because he was the top there, the big man. And he noticed how nervous I was and he asked me why. I said, "Such a fantastic piece of ground and I will be very disappointed if I

can't get it." He said, "Why shouldn't you be able to get it?" I said, "I better tell you the truth. One picture is a Ukrainian picture and the other one is a Yiddish picture." So he said, "What should make you nervous about that?" I told him what I lived through in Westchester. He said, "All right, show me where it is." We got into his car, which was a roadster, and we drove to the land again. Of course, my Jews outside were dying! They saw me come out with this monk and get in his car. So I showed him the ground and when we came back, he said, "If you want, you can build your sets here." I said, "But is the diocese of New Jersey going to approve it?" He says, "We have nothing to do with the diocese, we are completely autonomous, and furthermore, the Catholic Church has always sponsored the arts. Furthermore, I assume this thing is played in a Russian or Polish village and the Jews have beards—all our brothers have beards, so you have extras and you save yourself the money for beards."

Then, believe it or not, we found out when we came back with the plans that next to this ground was Camp Siegfried, the camp of the Bund. And on the left side was a nudist camp! So that nothing should happen to the sets as we built them, the academicians and their pupils stood at night with guns, so the Bund couldn't do anything to our construction. This was the time of the *Sitzkrieg Blitzkrieg* when the Germans walked to Belgium and the big scare came, so the Father came to New York to our apartment and offered to build a bungalow so that we could live on Church grounds. One of the newspapers wrote an article about this thing called "Nudists, Hollywood and the Bund." It was the most unbelievable story. We opened the picture in October in New York in '38. And the entire Catholic clergy of New Jersey arrived in full regalia to see the picture. And that was an unbelievable time in American democracy. I lived through it, or I would never have believed it possible.

PB: And when did you make the Ukrainian picture?

EGU: They were back-to-back. I finished *The Blacksmith* and went right into the Ukrainian picture. It opened in 1939. It was an unbelievable time.

PB: Did you make the Ukrainian picture at the same place and with the same sets as *Green Fields*?

EGU: No. Different.

PB: Well, that's incredible—did you learn to speak Russian?

EGU: Yes. I had a knowledge of Russian. And I had to learn Yiddish from scratch. Then Pare Lorentz gave me the title, "Director of the Minorities."

PB: Don't tell me you did some more!

EGU: Yah. I did two more Yiddish pictures. One with David Opatoshu called *Die Klatsche* (*The Light Ahead*)—*Fishe da Krin* was the original name. Then I did a comedy with Leo Fuchs called *Americaner Schadchen* (*The Marriage Broker*).

PB: None of these are listed. What years are these?

EGU: Thirty-eight, thirty-nine.

PB: What locations did you use for those?

EGU: *The Light Ahead* in the location of *Greene Felde* in Jersey, and on the Ukrainian background. You must realize these pictures were made for practically no money. *Greene Felde* was made for $8,000 cash, in five shooting days.

PB: Really?

EGU: But we had six weeks rehearsal. The assistant and I had to sleep in the same bed in a broken-down hotel in Newark. I mean, we were so poor, you have no idea. We had nothing but ambitions. On *Green Fields* I had 15,000 feet of negative to shoot the picture. It was a two-hour picture. The ratio was one and one-fourth to one. But I used the first BNC.[1] Hollywood never had that—I got it.

PB: So, in other words, when you started making pictures for PRC, it was luxury?

EGU: Oh, my God—this was big time. But you have never seen the cooperation we got on *Green Fields*. As I told you there was $8,000 in cash, which we got from Household Finance. Every one of us, the producers, hocked the furniture in his home.

PB: But the pictures made a lot of money, didn't they?

EGU: Afterwards, sure.

PB: I mean, *Green Fields* became quite successful, didn't it?

EGU: Ach, it broke every record in New York. Over $80,000, and a $16,000 negative. It broke the Garbo record up in Bronxville. It was like a fire—that's another story.

PB: Did you have a piece of it?

EGU: No. No, couldn't afford it.

PB: What was the order of the films?

EGU: *Natalka Poltavka* was first, then came *Green Fields*, then came

[1] *Blimped News Camera:* The standard studio film production camera for 35 mm. (The term *blimp* refers to the soundproof cover for the film magazine, which enables sound to be recorded while the camera is running.)—Eds.

The Singing Blacksmith, *Zaporosh Sa Dunayem*, and then came *The Marriage Broker*. I made a Negro picture before that, too.

PB: You mean *Moon over Harlem* [1939]?

EGU: Yah.

PB: How did *Moon over Harlem* come about?

EGU: That came about through a boy who was very friendly with the man who wrote *Porgy*, DuBose Heyward. The boy had a script. I had nothing to do with the organization of the picture, but was hired as the director. As a matter of fact, the picture was cast when I came in. It was nearly completely ready to go. They had a contract from the Negro circuit in the South; at that time there were black theatres and there were white theatres. I had four days to make the picture. We had two days in a studio, an old cigar warehouse, which was rigged up in New Jersey, and the actual locations, like the nightclub up in Harlem, which had to be done after two o'clock in the morning.

PB: When everybody had gone home.

EGU: Yah. So it was quite an experience. It was done for very little money. There couldn't have been $8,000 in cash there. I knew that the singers, we had over fifty of them, were paid 25¢ a day, and they had to travel back to Harlem and over to Jersey. It was one of the most pitiful things I ever did. It was done on nothing. We didn't have full reels—it was all done with short ends.[2] So you can imagine—we had to reload the camera every two minutes, because some of the short ends were only a hundred feet. It was really something, but we made quite a good picture. I tried for the first time what was later on called the Rossellini style. We didn't use actors, we used real people, and they were very natural.

PB: From the streets?

EGU: Yah. I was given two weeks to rehearse up in Harlem.

PB: It was a musical?

EGU: Musical. Yes. Very much on the style of *Three Dark Saints* and *Porgy and Bess*, but really Negro. Donald Hayward did the music. None of the creative people were white.

PB: Except you.

EGU: Except me.

[2] *Short ends:* leftover fragments of unexposed film (cut off the end of a roll in reloading the camera). Usually resold to labs, which in turn sell the short ends to low-budget producers.—Eds.

PB: And how were you approached for that?

EGU: I knew Donald Hayward.

PB: And who released that film?

EGU: They released it themselves and had a Southern distributor.

PB: Was it ever shown in the North?

EGU: Yah. I was at the opening at the RKO's Harlem, which is a very big theatre—seats three thousand.

PB: Oh yes. What did you do after that?

EGU: I did *The Light Ahead*, which was my own production. Then I did the Army teaching films. Then I was a year with the Ford Motor Motion Picture Department.

PB: And what did you do for them?

EGU: All their teaching films, all their convention films. The pictures for the Army were on celestial navigation, on the jeep, on the command car. They had to have teaching films about nuts and bolts!

PB: Let me ask you—you made the one picture at Universal, *The Black Cat*, which was for a major studio. Did you have difficulty getting a job for a major studio again after you made these independent films?

EGU: No, I wouldn't go with a major studio. After *Green Fields* Zanuck wanted me to do two pictures with Shirley Temple. I said, "How do you come to me for pictures with Shirley Temple?" So he said, "You made *Green Fields*—it's a pastoral film." So I said, "Don't let's talk about it. I don't want to hear a word about such things." And as a matter of fact, I knew Mayer very well and I prided myself that he could never hire me! I did not want to be ground up in the Hollywood hash machine.

PB: Why did you decide to go back to PRC, were you given freedom there?

EGU: Yes. That happened in a strange way. A friend of mine, maybe the finest producer in Europe at that time, Seymour Nebenzal, came to America. He made *Mayerling* [1936] and *M*, and was what I considered the Selznick of Europe. He was a man of exquisite taste. He came to New York and we wanted to set up an independent picture company. Before we could formulate our plans, Metro hired him. I was working in New York and Detroit. Of course, Seymour could not get along with the powers that be at Metro and decided to become independent. The moment that I knew Seymour needed me out here, I quit everything in New York and Detroit and came back to the Coast. I wrote my first big script after I returned for Seymour.

PB: What was that?

EGU: *Les Otages* (*The Hostages*). He had made the picture in Europe already. Metro found the writer who was writing for Seymour—I was supervising the writer—and bought the script from the writer and sued us to step out. They lost the suit. We could have collected a tremendous amount of money, but I insisted that Nebenzal not do such a thing and we settled by having Mr. L. B. Mayer come to the court and pay me one dollar in front of everybody, because I didn't submit anything to him. This was the script that was used for *Song of Russia* [1943], which was produced by Pan Berman at Metro.

PB: But you didn't receive any credit for that?

EGU: No. We just turned it over.

PB: Then you made *Prisoner of Japan* [1942]?

EGU: First I worked on *Hitler's Madman* [1943]. Seymour Nebenzal came up with an idea about Nietzsche. He hired Emil Ludwig as a writer, and Ludwig wrote a script that couldn't be used. It was horrible. I got my gang from the Yiddish picture to help us. My wife and I worked with Hirshbein and we got a script. On the strength of the script, Nebenzal raised $300,000 and we started the production. [Leon] Fromkess had come out and the whole PRC thing was collapsing. I met Fromkess, who was an accountant then, through my connection with Pathé Lab. Pathé put me in charge of the whole program with Seymour helping me. The first script they gave me was *Prisoner of Japan*, which already had a contract for a director named [Arthur] Ripley. So I had to produce the picture, rewrite the script, and finally shoot the picture the last two days of the six days he shot. Through that I drifted into PRC and couldn't get out. I did so many pictures for them. What helped me at PRC was that number 1: I could use my crew, and I nearly was running the studio from a technical end. The little *Girls in Chains* [1943] was such a gigantic money success that we could have bought the PRC Studio. I wouldn't sign any contract with PRC, but this was my home and I could operate and bring any idea immediately to the top echelon. I suffered, of course, from one thing. I was so tied up that I couldn't take any contracts on the outside. Nebenzal became a huge producer with *Whistle Stop* [1946], where he found Ava Gardner, *Summer Storm* [1944], which made Linda Darnell, and he discovered Lana Turner. We were friendly and I kept going there. At that time I was called "the Capra of PRC." It was a nice family feeling, not too much interference—if there was interference, it was only that we had no money, that was all.

Fromkess became head of the studio; he would listen, and when I would say I want to make a *Bluebeard* [1944], that's what we would make.

PB: *Hitler's Madman* was directed by Douglas Sirk, wasn't it?

EUG: It was his first [American] picture—I hired him for that. It was sold to M-G-M after it was made.

PB: It was a very good picture but you received no credit on that, did you?

EGU: None.

PB: But you worked on the script?

EGU: Script and sets.

PB: I see. Excellent picture. Sirk also did *Summer Storm*. He was a good director, don't you think?

EGU: He was in my background. He came from the German UFA-influenced group. Of course, what he did later on with Universal—no! That was the typical Universal type of picture that he made.

PB: Well, he brought something to those pictures, too. It was better than the Universal product.

EGU: Universal at that time was pretty bad. Yes, Siodmak made *The Killers* [1946], but that was not typical of Universal.

PB: Now, tell me, why did you have to take over from Ripley and shoot the last two days?

EGU: Because Ripley was not very normal.

PB: He was a good director though, wasn't he?

EGU: He was a much better editor. He was Stroheim's editor on *Foolish Wives*. He was a sick man.

PB: Mentally or physically?

EGU: Mentally and physically.

PB: I know he made very few pictures in his career—I often wondered why.

EGU: He was ill. He made a very good one later called *Voice in the Wind* [1944].

PB: Yes. Excellent. I haven't seen too many. I didn't see *Prisoner of Japan*. Is it a good picture?

EGU: Strange picture . . . Yah.

PB: After that you made *Tomorrow We Live* [1942], which you directed and Nebenzal produced?

EGU: Correct. Bart Lytton wrote the screenplay.

PB: I never saw that film—is it a good picture?

EGU: Yes. Strange, very strange. I was very much influenced by that

time by Grand Guignol, which took me twenty years to get out of my system. The melodrama and the absolute theatrics was very, very tempting.

PB: And *Tomorrow We Live* was a thriller?

EGU: No. A horror picture in the desert with Ricardo Cortez.

PB: Then you made *My Son, the Hero* [1943]?

EGU: Yah. I was very friendly with Damon Runyon and I started Columbia on a Runyon streak in the early thirties. I felt that I could write something similar to him, and that's what made the picture.

PB: It was an amusing picture. You must have made it very quickly, too.

EGU: It was again six days.

PB: Evidently you worked on the scripts of some pictures at PRC which you didn't direct—like *Corregidor*.

EGU: Correct. *Corregidor, Danger! Women at Work* [both 1943]—there was a whole slew of these things.

PB: For which you sometimes didn't take credit?

EGU: No, I couldn't.

PB: *Girls in Chains* I saw, and you said it was made in five days?

EGU: Yah.

PB: Incredible. Do you remember how the idea for that came about?

EGU: This came from the newspaper. There was some political graft in one of the women's jails. There was a lot of newspaper coverage on it, and I thought up the title. Fromkess and his right-hand man, Martin Mooney, felt that we had a big chance with the thing. The script was written in something like three weeks.

PB: The title is very commercial.

EGU: Of course! That's what made the goddamned thing. At the beginning of the season, Fromkess would sit down with me and [Sig] Neufeld, and we would invent forty-eight titles. We didn't have stories yet; they had to be written to fit the cockeyed titles. I am convinced when I look back that all this was a challenge. I knew that nothing was impossible. When *Double Indemnity* [1944] came out and was a huge success, I wrote a picture for Neufeld that we called *Single Indemnity*. We were able to write that junk in about two weeks.

PB: The picture was not made?

EGU: Oh, yes, it was made, but not with that title. Paramount made us take the title off! I think it was called *Blond Ice*, or something like that.

PB: You didn't direct it?

EGU: No.

PB: *Isle of Forgotten Sins* [1943], what was that?

EGU: That was a hangover I had left from the time I was with Murnau in Bora Bora on *Tabu* [1931].

PB: *Tabu*—did you work on that?

EGU: Yes, of course. And then John Ford made the picture for Sam Goldwyn called *The Hurricane* [1937]. The miniature department had about two hundred palm trees; I knew I could persuade them to borrow the miniatures for a picture—so I wrote *Isle of Forgotten Sins.*

PB: So that you could use the miniatures?!

EGU: Correct.

PB: You were having fun over there, it seems, at PRC. What did you do on *Tabu*?

EGU: I worked on the script with Murnau, got all his equipment down there, and set up the production for him. When he came back, I cut the picture and got it ready for Eisenfeld to score it.

PB: And [Robert] Flaherty did very little on the picture?

EGU: Flaherty was sent back after the first four weeks. They couldn't get along. The drunk Irishman on one side and the German educated at Oxford on the other. Murnau was a very, very difficult man, but a great, great talent.

PB: And then what about *Jive Junction* [1943]? I saw *Jive Junction*—I don't think that's one of your best pictures.

EGU: No. You saw the conflict I brought into that script. I wanted classical music against jive, and you couldn't do it for the little money I had. And, of course, it was propaganda to get the kids in America working on the farms during the war.

PB: I see in the credits that Irving Wallace had something to do with the story—was that the Irving Wallace who became a novelist?

EGU: Yes, sir.

PB: How did you feel, making pictures like these—so quickly and with a subject matter not always of the most distinction?

EGU: I had to compromise to keep PRC in business. Now I admit to myself that I was somehow schizophrenic in making pictures. On one hand, I was absolutely concerned with box office and on the other, I was trying to create art and decency, with a style. I could not completely get out of the commercial though I knew it limited me. There was no reason for me to make a *Jive Junction*, except that the picture had to be made, and had to be done quickly, and we couldn't jeopardize a penny.

PB: Yes. Then I suppose that even things like *Girls in Chains* and *Isle of Forgotten Sins* fall into that commercial category, whereas *Bluebeard* falls into the other.

EGU: Yes. You can tell by the cameraman I had on the picture if I took a picture very seriously or not. For my serious pictures I always had [Eugene] Schuftan.

PB: Was he on *Bluebeard*?

EGU: Yes.

PB: Who is Jockey Feindel?

EGU: Feindel was actually the operative cameraman, because Schuftan never could get into the union.

PB: So he couldn't take credit.

EGU: Of course not. He took the Academy Award as you know for the best photography, on Paul Newman's picture with Jackie Gleason . . . *The Hustler* [1960]. Schuftan still isn't in the union.

PB: Hm. And so he shot *Bluebeard.*

EGU: Yah.

PB: Did he shoot *Detour*?

EGU: No, *Detour* was shot by my old friend Benny Kline. He shot *The Wife of Monte Cristo* for me and *Strange Illusion* [1945].[3]

PB: Now, how did you get the idea for *Bluebeard*? That's one of your best pictures, I think.

EGU: Yes. It was a tremendously challenging picture.

PB: Shot quickly?

EGU: Very quickly—six days.

PB: Amazing. It had a remarkable sense of mood and atmosphere.

EGU: Yah. All my love for Paris came out in the picture.

PB: And you created Paris on the back lot?

EGU: Of course. I did the sets myself as I did in *The Wife of Monte Cristo.* As an art director, from my earliest time on, I adored the Île-de-France, Montparnasse and Montmartre, and whatever I did I always wound up in that. I adore Paris. I spent two years of my youth in the Victorine in Nice. I was there with Rex Ingram.

PB: Yes, you told me. Well, *Bluebeard* has an incredible style. I really think it's one of your best pictures.

[3] Official credits list Adolph Edward Kull as cinematographer on *The Wife of Monte Cristo* and Philip Tannura on *Strange Illusion.*—Eds.

EGU: Yah. First of all, John Carradine was a person, like Arthur Kennedy, I could hang onto. He knew what we were trying to do. Yah, it was a very lovely picture. PRC was unhappy with it at first.

PB: Really. But it did finally make some money.

EGU: Of course. It was one of the pictures that earned tremendous money in France.

PB: The title is a very commercial title actually.

EGU: Yah. I had a fight with Chaplin about that title—I beat Chaplin out of it. He was making *Monsieur Verdoux* [1947]. I think my picture was nicer. *Monsieur Verdoux* was a horrible picture.

PB: After *Bluebeard,* you made *Strange Illusion.* How did the idea for that come about?

EGU: [Fritz] Rotter's play in New York, *Letters from Lucerne,* with Gerte Mosheim, was a big flop. I saw it and it was very nice, though not well written—Rotter mostly did musical comedies. I got Fromkess to buy the play; but when we wrote the script I went so far away from Rotter's play that we sold it back to him! I was fascinated at that time with psychoanalysis and this story was about a father-son relationship. The picture was very well received critically. Whether it made money, I do not know. At that time I was already chafing at the bit and wanted *out* of PRC.

PB: But you stayed there for another five or six pictures?

EGU: Oh, yah. Fromkess really locked me in.

PB: There are some very interesting shots in there; I remember one in particular—there's a painting on the wall and you pan around it. Do you remember that shot?

EGU: Yah.

PB: Was it made very quickly also?

EGU: Six days.

PB: Incredible. Now *Club Havana* [1946] . . .

EGU: . . . That I adored making. I loved it. I had no script—I did a Rossellini again. This was a picture I was never going to make; Russell Rouse and Clarence Greene were going to make it. Fromkess had hired a whole staff and everything, and then threw the script out a week before we were to shoot. He called me in and said, "OK, you say you can do things. Shoot it without a script—invent it." So I got myself some actors. I had only one page—an outline. Schuftan did that picture for me, too.[4] I really had fun

[4] Officially credited to Benjamin N. Kline.—Eds.

on that one; we shot the whole picture on one set. We had quite a musical success with the cockeyed thing. "Tico Tico" was used in that the first time.

PB: So the challenge was not the subject matter, but just to make something?

EGU: No! To make something special—to be able to do a *Grand Hotel* [1932] in one place.

PB: This was PRC's *Grand Hotel—Club Havana.*

EGU: Yah.

PB: Very funny. Where did the idea come for *Detour,* which is my favorite of your films?

EGU: Now, I'm going to tell you something strange. The brother-in-law of Tony Quinn wrote a very bad book called *Detour.* [Martin] Goldsmith was his name. I took the thing to Martin Mooney and rewrote the script. I was always in love with the idea and with the main character, a boy who plays piano in Greenwich Village and really wants to be a decent pianist. He's so down on his luck that the girl who goes to the Coast is the only person he can exist with sex-wise—the *Blue Angel* thing. And then the idea to get involved on that long road into Fate, where he's an absolute loser, fascinated me. The same thing, of course, with the boy who played the leading character, Tom Neal. He wound up in jail after he killed his own wife. He did practically the same thing he did in the picture.

PB: Surely not with a telephone cord.

EGU: No, that was the only thing he didn't do.

PB: That was one of the most memorable murders because it's a murder by long distance, through the door, and so on. Was that one of your ideas?

EGU: Yah.

PB: A very grisly touch. Ann Savage was an excellent character. How fast did you shoot that?

EGU: Six days.

PB: All these pictures were made in six days—one week?

EGU: Sure. The only one that took two weeks was *The Wife of Monte Cristo*—

PB: Because it was a costume picture?

EGU: Because it was a *big* picture.

PB: Big picture—two weeks! Are you fond of *Detour,* yourself?

EGU: I adore *Detour.*

PB: Which are your favorite pictures?

EGU: *Black Cat, Detour,* and *Naked Dawn.*

PB: *Naked Dawn* is a remarkable film.

EGU: Also shot in ten days.

PB: In color?

EGU: Yes, sir.

PB: Incredible. That was released by U-I but not made for U-I?

EGU: Right.

PB: Now what about *The Wife of Monte Cristo*—how did that come about?

EGU: Fromkess called me in one day and told me that Eddie Small was making a fortune with *The Son of Monte Cristo* [1940], in fact, with all the family of Monte Cristo. He said he wanted to make a Monte Cristo also, so we decided to make the *Wife.*

PB: I see—so it had very little to do with Dumas.

EGU: Actually there is a very bad novel by Dumas, placed in Arabia, called *The Wife of Monte Cristo.*

PB: I've never seen it; how is it?

EGU: It's a nice picture. It's better than the one Eddie Small made.

PB: And was that shot by Schuftan, too?

EGU: Yah.

PB: And who was Adolph Kull, who got the credit?

EGU: He was also one of the operators.

PB: Terrible that Schuftan couldn't get credit. It's awful.

EGU: It's a pity. He has credit on every European print.

PB: Ah, I see. What is *Her Sister's Secret* [1946]? That was really quite a good picture.

EGU: Yes. That was a remake of a German picture. It was the first American job of the cameraman Franz Planer, a Viennese, who had worked with me in 1920.

PB: On what?

EGU: *Sodom and Gomorrah.*

PB: Was that a movie?

EGU: Yes. Directed by Michael Curtiz, at that time he was Mishka Kehrtez. It was done in Vienna, sets by Julius Borsidine and myself.

PB: *The Strange Woman* [1946] is a difficult film to get to see, but Schuftan gets credit as producer on it.

EGU: Schuftan was not on *The Strange Woman* at all. Beautiful picture. It nearly got Hedy Lamarr an Academy nomination. It's the only picture

where she ever had to act. A beautiful picture. Very difficult, very beautiful.

PB: That was the first picture away from PRC?

EGU: Yah. *Her Sister's Secret* was the last picture for PRC.

PB: Did you leave them amicably?

EGU: Yes. I was under contract to them. They got the money for *The Strange Woman*—not me. I got $250 a week, and they were collecting $1,500. I made more money for PRC on *The Strange Woman* than they had paid me the whole time I worked there.

PB: How did you get the job?

EGU: Through Hedy Lamarr.

PB: She wanted you for the picture?

EGU: Yah. It was the first film she made away from M-G-M. She was her own producer.

PB: Who was Jack Chertok?

EGU: The great TV producer—*My Favorite Martian.*

PB: Ah, I see. He was the producer of that with Hunt Stromberg?

EGU: Yah.

PB: You had quite a good cast in that: George Sanders, Louis Hayward, Gene Lockhart. And a good novel by Ben Ames Williams.

EGU: Very difficult to handle because it went over seven lifetimes. But I had a good writer, a boy who became quite famous, Herb Meadow. A very difficult boy, too. He was brought out here for *The Robe* [1953].

PB: *Carnegie Hall* [1947] is a classic of a kind. It's one of your longest pictures, I think. I saw the complete version once, and I've seen it cut also. I must say it loses a great deal when it's cut because those musical numbers are very important.

EGU: It has become the classic textbook for TV and everything.

PB: How did *Carnegie Hall* come about?

EGU: They saw some stuff I had done for *The Strange Woman,* and I had quite a reputation for classical music. Stokowski's a very old friend of mine—I supervised the recordings on *Fantasia* [1940] with him. I did all the Toscanini recordings; I did the Philco Program in Philadelphia.

PB: For television?

EGU: No, for radio. Music is one of my great passions.

PB: It's an interesting picture mainly because of the way you handle the musical episodes.

EGU: It was impossible to tell a story after Wagner's *Meistersinger.* I wanted to do a documentary, which they wouldn't let me do. I wanted the

Hall to speak and have the experience of the music. Couldn't put it across—had to have that silly story. What are you going to do after Rubinstein plays Chopin? You're going to have a scene where *actors talk*? It's impossible. It's as impossible as putting Hepburn and Walker into a picture about Schumann. Just can't be done.

PB: Those two films were released through United Artists, but were made by completely independent companies.

EGU: Correct.

PB: *Ruthless* is another one of your best films.

EGU: Yah. You also see it in a cut version. After the main release, they cut it.

PB: Why?

EGU: I don't know . . . Hollywood ideas.

PB: What was cut?

EGU: There were three big sequences between Hayward and the youngster that were cut, and then two big sequences of Greenstreet and Zachary Scott. It was a dangerous script that had to be cut because McCarthy came in. It was written by Alvah Bessie.

PB: He doesn't get credit, though?

EGU: Of course not.

PB: Who are S. K. Lauren and G. Kahn?

EGU: They were names that were made up. It was in the panic time.

PB: Already in 1948?

EGU: Yah.

PB: Burt Glennon was the photographer. He was very good.

EGU: A wonderful man who did the first *Stagecoach* [1939]. He got an Academy Award for that. Cantankerous bastard, but a wonderful cameraman.

PB: What interested you most about *Ruthless*?

EGU: The interesting thing was going back in characterization—the flashback. Furthermore, the complete evilness and ruthlessness about money—that's what I wanted to do. They cut it out. There still is something left in the picture about that. I wanted to do a morality play, a Jesuitic morality film, on three levels—earth, hell, and heaven. That's why I put the house on top. But they fought me every step, because it was a very bad indictment against one hundred percent Americanism, as Upton Sinclair saw it. And I had a very, very weak producer, Arthur Lyons. Ach—the typical agent.

PB: The morality play is something that interested you all the way through your career.

EGU: Yah. You must understand, I'm speaking of the morality play of the Jesuits, not the morality play in the style of *Everyman*, which is the British morality play in the Anglo-Saxon background. I, however, see the morality play in Gothic form, before the Renaissance. I see it in the dark gray of Germany, Holland, more or less of the Breughel period. Musically, I can only point to *Carmina Burana*, which come from the same time. Now in the telling of a story in films, the director is more or less obliged to stylize characters as characters are stylized in artwork in the church of Notre Dame or the Gothic churches of England. You have only a short time to tell a story, and therefore—I'm now going from one theory to another, so don't misunderstand me—you must have two sides, as in the commedia dell'arte, and later seen in our great Western successes as the man with the white hat, the man with black hat. You have the wonderful chance, which no theatre ever had, to create the background against which your characters tell a story, a complete depth by stylizing them in one form. If you take today, for instance, Z [1969], in it there is the highest form of stylization. The director created a Greek chorus with the blue steel helmets of the police, and this becomes a theme in his film. It reminds you of the Eumenides, whatever you have in the great Greek theatre of the classical time in mythology. You sit and you look at that picture, and whenever danger comes and whenever brutality forces you, these blue-helmeted figures take the whole screen. Now look what Schlesinger does in his *Midnight Cowboy* [1969]—something so amazing—and I'm sure he hasn't thought it out. Maybe it is a feeling. He tells the story from the optical viewpoint of that Texas boy who comes into New York and sees a New York I have never seen, though I've lived there maybe thirty or forty years. Here's a road from Texas, the flashing tremendous signs, the light of the signs, and then that poverty-stricken New York one block or half a block away from Fifth Avenue. I thought his greatest morality shot, stronger than when Everyman stands in front of the cathedral of Salzburg all alone, was that one shot of Dustin Hoffman standing on Fifth Avenue when the boy is meeting the girl in the hotel there, and he starts to dream about Florida. That little figure of that man in the tremendous street and the background of Radio City. No theatre, no book, has that which the camera can give you. With the morality play you have to understand one thing—there is a main theme—one theme that says he is bad, therefore he will go to hell and will pay, though the angels up there will try everything to make him rest. He deserves rest. Now if you try to do that in a motion picture, you have simple depth, and the characters move off the screen. No Cinemascope, no Cinerama can do that to you. A character

moves off the screen. For instance, when Dustin Hoffman dies on the bus after the boy has said to him two minutes before, "You know, when we get down there, I'm going to get a job and forget all that other stuff," it would take you fifteen pages to describe what is done by that dead figure laying there, and the tragedy of the boy going up there and telling the driver that he's dead. I'm always trying to do that and it's very difficult to do, because you must have a viewpoint when you tell the story. You have it in *Detour* when that boy stands in that shower, after he has found that the guy is a gambler and realizes he should've been killed anyhow, though he didn't kill him. I'm trying very hard not to achieve something specific but to give it a viewpoint. Tell it from somebody I can feel for; don't do it from five viewpoints. Sam Goldwyn had a very primitive saying: you have to have a beginning, a middle, and an ending. What he meant is to follow one character and tell the story from that character's view. Never switch from the boy to the girl, because the screen cannot tell two stories at the same time. It must be told from one person's viewpoint; and when you do that, you get a certain style.

PB: Why does it have to be told from one viewpoint, do you think?

EGU: We have been looking, to my knowledge, for over forty years, to identify ourselves with our audience. That's what the director tries to do. You take a novel or a play written for the Broadway stage or an original story and you try to put it on the screen. Outside of *Gone with the Wind* [1939], which is an American disease (it took the place of *Intolerance* [1916] or *The Birth of a Nation* [1915] in our heritage), all your great pictures have been originals—written, conceived, felt for the screen. If a great novelist could write pictures, we never would have died with pictures as we are dying now. It doesn't happen by accident that every French director is called in when the first master script is done. The director does the decoupage with the writer. Here, a month after the script is finished and somebody gives you the money, you pick up the telephone and say "What directors can I get?" The schlup reads it, goes onto the set and he knows how to make the picture. He does?! Schlesinger came from Europe and spent a *year* covering the waterfront. He saw New York; he saw Texas; he saw what people do, which a native American couldn't see. That's what Buñuel does. Every picture he makes is a morality play, only he goes and brings the gargoyles down from their niches up on Notre Dame. I don't do that. I say: use the best and the clearest thought-out—which is simplicity—and play against that background. King Vidor, whom I greatly admired in my youth,

made a picture, *The Big Parade* [1925]. There is a scene where Renée Adorée hugs Gilbert's boot and hangs onto him as the truck pulls out to the front. I was devastated with that scene. These are the moments that make pictures worthwhile. I really am looking for absolution for all the things I had to do for money's sake.