

## The Second Million Comes Real Fast

Director Joel Schumacher grew up poor and wild on the streets of Queens. It was a long, rough road to mastering the Hollywood deal. **By Holly Peterson Photo by Chris Floyd**

**TALK:** What was your life like when you were growing up?

**JOEL SCHUMACHER:** My father died suddenly of pneumonia when I was four, and my mother worked six days and three nights a week, so I was pretty wild. I started drinking when I was nine, smoking at 10, sex at 11 or 12. My first job was delivering meat on a bicycle for a butcher in Long Island City, when I was nine. I'd get a nickel or a dime tip.

**TALK:** Did you think you'd ever get rich?

**SCHUMACHER:** Never. I just knew that I wanted to make some money so I could give my mother a better life.

**TALK:** Why did you get into the movie business?

**SCHUMACHER:** From our apartment window we could see the back doors of a movie palace that showed films "banned" by the Catholic Church. I used to sneak in to see *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *A Place in the Sun*.

**TALK:** Did you know you wanted to be a director then?

**SCHUMACHER:** I knew when I saw *Great Expectations*. It starts with Pip skipping through the graveyard after his father's death—that image haunted me for years. The film also gave me great expectations, because I wanted to get out of a poor neighborhood. Movies became my antidote to loneliness, my medication.

**TALK:** So how did you get from Long Island City to Hollywood?

**SCHUMACHER:** I started out in design and fashion but quickly spiraled into sex, drugs, and rock & roll. I stopped shooting up in 1970. I sold a couple of scripts, and the second one, *Car Wash*, was a big hit.

**TALK:** Did your becoming a big director change your love life?

**SCHUMACHER:** Many confused young people will throw themselves at a director because they think he will make

them stars. That's a temptation, but it's an ugly thing to do.

**TALK:** Have you ever done it anyway?

**SCHUMACHER:** I'd like to say no. But perhaps when I first got the title I may have succumbed a couple of times.

**TALK:** When did you make your first million?

**SCHUMACHER:** In 1989, at age 49. I did a movie called *Cousins*. The second million comes real fast. For me it came with *Flatliners*.

**TALK:** Do you think making money is worthwhile in itself?

**SCHUMACHER:** Every person who makes

as a telephone book. For the agents, lawyers, and managers, the deals are their movies. By that I mean these people are left out of all the creative excitement of actually shooting the film, so the deal making becomes their dramatic creation. The making of these deals can be as fraught with ego, tension, and door slamming as the making of the film, because egos are on the line, big stakes are on the line, futures are on the line.

**TALK:** What do you do when megastars act like babies?

**SCHUMACHER:** Then I treat them like babies.

**TALK:** What do you do?

**SCHUMACHER:** I go into the trailer and kick their ass. "This will not be tolerated," I tell them. "How dare you?" I have a very simple philosophy: The person who gets paid the most money on the film should be the best behaved.

**TALK:** What's the best advice you give to people about how to negotiate in Hollywood?

**SCHUMACHER:** I'm always mistrustful of the demure, adorable ingenue who appears not to understand anything as her agents, managers, and lawyers come after the deal like sharks. You are responsible for your representation, and your representation reflects your own character.

**TALK:** What makes a deal a good deal?

**SCHUMACHER:** I think if you screw people too viciously when you have the cards, it will come back to haunt you. I just believe in karma too much. There are people who lose their job and their clout, and then the entire Hollywood community cheers and sings, "Ding, dong, the witch is dead." If you create ugly perpetrations on the world, society will somehow hang you upside down, like Mussolini. ■

"Movies became my antidote to loneliness." Joel Schumacher in New York City, November 2000.



money will have the agony and the ecstasy of their own trip. But some people have to make money in order to find themselves. If you grow up, as I did, with your nose pressed against the window of the luxurious restaurant, and it looks like paradise, the greatest thing that can happen is that you get in there fast and eat. You'll find out the food and the company are not as great as you thought they would be.

**TALK:** Why are the negotiations to get a movie made so complicated?

**SCHUMACHER:** The contracts are as thick