



Azed and Amiel's excellent adventure

by Azed Majeed

Assignment: Interview the dynamic new film director, Jon Amiel and talk about his new film, *Tune in Tomorrow*, starring Peter Falk, Barbara Hershey and Keanu Reeves. Simple task? Maybe for some, but not for this foot-in-the-mouth reporter.



—Jon: "Won't you come in?"

Saturday, Sept. 15, 11:30am —AAAAAAAAGH!!! I have to interview Jon Amiel in an hour and a half and I'm still sitting around the apartment in my underwear trying to come up with some snappy questions.

In a final and foolhardy attempt to educate myself and, therefore feel like less of a boob in the presence of the great director, I turn to my film theory textbooks from last year . . . —AAAAAAAAGH!!!

Later that same morning —AAAAAAAAGH!!!

12:30 pm —I'm on my way to the Sutton Place Hotel, suite 414. I try to calm my shaky nerves. I down six cans of Jolt and go through the following internal dialogue:

Okay . . . Just relax . . . I'll just walk in there and assume control of the situation . . . yeah! That's it! . . . he's probably some overfed, over-indulged pompous egomaniac . . . HAH!! I'll show him that he can't walk all over people just because he's made a coupl'a movies . . . uh . . . a coupl'a great films, that is . . . *The Singing Detective* (gulp), *Queen of Hearts* (double gulp), and *Tune in Tomorrow* —AAAAAAAAGH!!! —AAAAAAAAGH!!!

12:55 pm — I'm in the elevator at the Sutton Place. As I go over my opening remarks, I suddenly realize that I am not alone in the elevator; there is a small group of people huddled together in the corner, scared half-silly by my audible mutterings.

1:00pm —I have arrived!

Opening remarks

—Az: "Hi . . . er . . . you Jon Amiel?"

—Jon: "Yes, how'dya do? Won't you come in?"

—Az: "Hi . . . er . . . you Jon Amiel?"

Jon Amiel was born in London, England. He attended Cambridge University where he studied English Literature . . . Jeez, how munjie cake can ya get? Unlike most young aspiring directors, Jon confessed that he was never all that interested in film.

"I can't recall ever having a burning ambition to direct movies. Truthfully, I only took to directing films out of desperation. It always scared the pants off'a me and I avoided it as long as I could."

I know what all you film students are thinking, but don't bitch, you'll get yer chance someday.

At university Jon became involved in writing music and directing theatre. After university he moved into television, first as a story editor, and then, after a three-month directing course (that's

right THREE MONTHS!! and I'm stuck here for four fuggin' years. After which I'll probably impress my friends and family by being promoted to assistant manager at The Dairy Queen) he began directing films for the BBC.

It was there that Jon directed the highly acclaimed six part film, *The Singing Detective*. It was the immense, critical success of this amazing mini-series (No, Richard Chamberlain isn't in it) which lead Jon to direct his first theatrical release, *Queen of Hearts*, to more critical, if not commercial success.

Now Jon has directed *Tune in Tomorrow*, based on the novel *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* by Mario Vargas Llosa. Why the title change? Well let Jon explain it:

"As our time drew to a close, I got around to the meaty stuff."

"Titles are always a very difficult issue. Titles such as *Surf Nazis Must Die* or *Revenge of the Killer Bimbos* only come along once in a while. The problem with using *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, as we discovered after we showed the film to some 2,000 people, was that for a lot of them it just had the wrong associations. *Aunt Julia* conjured up aged aunts and scriptwriter seemed literary and obscure and we didn't want to create an image for this film that was frousty and old fashioned—I don't believe it is."

This film is certainly not old fashioned, but what the hell does **frousty** mean? It isn't that Christmas snowman thing is it? Hm m m m m.

Tune in Tomorrow is typical of Jon's previous work, in that it deals with the precarious division between fantasy and reality using nifty satire to entertain and inform. Jon does with film what Marquez, Allende and Llosa do with literature. In the tradition of these great writers, he is interested in closing the gap between fantasy and reality.

"I think it's a whole lot of bullshit about fantasy and reality . . . I mean, every single one of us at that strange junction between sleeping and waking — which happens to all of us at least twice a day — knows that there is a moment when the reality inside your head becomes stronger than the reality outside it. I say, why separate them?"

As recognizable as a Jon Amiel film may be, he refuses to consider himself an auteur.

"I draw my energy from other people, I'm essentially first and foremost a collaborator. I think that one of the most destructive myths for a great number of contemporary directors is the myth of auteurism. I don't think auteurism is a talent given to many people."

Tune in Tomorrow is the result of a great collaboration between Jon, writer William Boyd and producers Mark Tarlow and John Fiedler.

" . . . you can always trust a guy who dips his french fries in a sidebowl of mayo!"

The film was completed for \$8-million, a relatively small budget considering that there are over 50 speaking parts, at least two explosions and lots of costumes.

The shooting covered many different locations, but was shot mostly in New Orleans where the production was stalled by nothing less than Hurricane Hugo.

Jon Amiel is not your typical pretentious film goof. He is very courteous and friendly (Jeez, I sound like somebody's mother).

We talked about many things besides films. For example, we found out that we both play guitar; he also told me that he used to write songs in the style of Dylan and Neil Young and that he spent six months in India studying the sitar.

Interestingly enough, I spent nine months in Pakistan studying my navel — maybe there is some hope for me after all! Throughout the interview I kept the same "I'm very nervous but I'm pretending to be cool" attitude which usually resulted in something like this:

—Az: "You said that you avoided directing . . . uh . . . um . . . er . . . Why?"

—Jon: (Pause; probably stunned by my grace and finesse) "*Directing is a highly stressful, life-shortening and frightening job. Most of the glamor is illusory.*"

—Az: (Azed, ace reporter, sees his opening) "What about all of this attention? This must be nice?"



—Az: "Hi . . . er . . . you Jon Amiel?"

—Jon: "Wot? If you think that sitting in a hotel room from 9:30 in the morning till 6:00 at night doing an endless stream of interviews is glamorous? NO SIR!"

—Az: (embarrassed grin on face) "Yeah . . . ha . . . I guess yer right."

As our time together drew to a close, I got around to the meaty stuff.

So did Jon, as he devoured a club sandwich with fries during the interview. However, since he didn't offer me any, my "meaty stuff" had to consist of questions about the use of satire and fantasy as a means of political expression in his films.

"I don't see my films as having a national political perspective . . . I do hope they are subversive, I think all good films are."

So much for the meaty stuff . . .

Now, for all you aspiring filmmakers out there who have decided to chuck it all and go into refrigerator maintenance after reading this interview . . . WISE UP!

Sure making films is lonely and difficult work, but there are positive things as well . . . LISTEN:

"Directing is somewhat akin to crack, in that you only have to experience that high once to become addicted. From that point on no matter how low the lows get you seem to, somehow, find yourself constantly chasing that moment of supreme exhilaration."

And when does that moment come, Jon?

"It comes when you find yourself standing behind the camera, weeping at the intensity of what an actor is doing, or laughing at what the actors are doing. It comes at those moments where you have an image in your mind and you see it translated by some extraordinary process that you can't even imagine . . . you can't even quite understand how it happened . . . but you see it translated to a large screen."

Words of wisdom from a trustworthy source.

How do you know that he's trustworthy?

BECAUSE . . . you can always trust a guy who dips his french fries into a sidebowl of mayo!