

# An Interview with Menno Meyjes

BY MARC SUSAN

**MENNO MEYJES** is a 30-year-old screenwriter-émigré from the Netherlands whose previous credits include a much admired script, *The Children's Crusade*, part of which was published in the first issue of *Emigre* magazine. He has written for Francis Coppola, Mick Jagger and others. Presently he is adapting a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel and bestseller, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, for director Steven Spielberg.

On April 2, 1985 I visit him at work in Los Angeles where he has an office at Spielberg's production company situated on the Universal Studios lot. The building is a splendid replica of a New Mexico-style adobe hacienda, off the main road and overlooking a lush canyon. Inside there are cool ceramic tile floors, skylights, and a receptionist dressed in white wearing turquoise and silver Navajo jewelry.

I walk through airy hallways where well-stocked coffee stations alternate with delectable displays of American Indian artifacts. Both sides of the door to Menno's office are flanked by production secretaries busily engaged in phone conversations.

The room is large and brightly lit from windows that look out over lush greenery. Besides an antique desk, electric typewriter and state-of-the-art telephone, there is a fireplace with some rustic chairs. Two spacious benches jut out from white walls. Here and there I notice movie memorabilia: Walt Disney cartoon characters in serious dark wooden frames, an E.T. mask and a clear plexiglass box filled with rubble labeled "Poltergeist."

Menno, dressed in a white cotton summer suit (no shirt) and white leather loafers, makes one last phone call while I shoot his portrait and set up the tape recorder for his interview.

What follows is part one of an interview about his idea for a Christopher Marlowe ballet: about the meaning of Marlowe's death as a symbol of dilemmas every artist faces; about Shakespeare; morality, love and ambition; and about Steven Spielberg's dramatic new movie, which at the time of this writing had just entered the first stages of production.

**Q WHY DID YOU WRITE A TREATMENT FOR A BALLET ABOUT MARLOWE? WAS IT AN ASSIGNMENT?** **A** No, No. It was inspired by a piece I saw done by the San Francisco Ballet: Shakespeare's *Tempest*. I thought it was a great idea to set a ballet in the Elizabethan world, in the theater world of the day, the old Globe and so on. It would be very theatrical and very quick paced, energetic, because the Elizabethan world was much like our own. It was an era of hope and youthful energy.

**Q AN UNUSUAL THING ABOUT "THE DEATH OF MARLOWE" IS THAT YOU MAKE MYTH OUT OF MARLOWE'S LIFE BY INTEGRATING ELEMENTS FROM HIS PLAYS.** **A** I was probably more interested in Marlowe the Myth than Marlowe the Man. One day Philip Austin, a man who knows his Marlowe and with whom I'm working on a Marlowe story in a different context, told me the story that Marlowe was such a figure of myth (I don't know if he made this up or not) that mothers in Victorian times used to warn their children and say: "You better be careful because otherwise the same thing will happen to you as to Marlowe." Legend has it that Marlowe was possessed by the Devil, and one night he's cutting up his food in his favorite inn and the Devil makes him plunge the knife into his eye. He falls backwards. Dead! Once I had this idea, it was like Marlowe was with me in the room. I couldn't get it out fast enough, and intuitively I understood what had happened to him.

**Q NOT EXACTLY A STORY ABOUT MISUNDERSTOOD GENIUS.** **A** No, not at all! Marlowe used to be followed around London by workmen: bricklayers, apprentices and so on. Theater was very much a popular art form at that time. You couldn't get the same people now to go to a play about Marlowe. You'd have a bunch of intellectuals sitting there. But 500 years ago, theater was much more directed at the audience: the actors didn't even face each other – they faced the audience and kind of shouted out their lines. Blank verse sounded just as strange then, probably, as it does today. The in-jokes, references to Spaniards, religious quarrels and other gossipy items were, of course, better understood, but it sounded strange, like a kind of punk-idiom.

**Q HOW DOES MARLOWE COMPARE TO SHAKESPEARE?** **A** Marlowe was a ground-breaker; he paved the way for Shakespeare. I don't think Shakespeare was as inventive, but he was probably a greater literary talent than Marlowe. Pioneers can usually only *show* you the promised land, but cannot lead

you to it. **WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES CONTRIBUTED TO MARLOWE'S RISE TO FAME? HE WAS FROM A WORKING CLASS FAMILY, WASN'T HE?** His father was a cobbler and Shakespeare's father was a butcher. They were the first working class heroes and they were also overachievers. Their rise to fame was possible because Elizabeth took the lid off the strata. The English have always been very good at that, as opposed to, for example, the Spaniards, who kept the aristocracy just sitting on everybody. That was what was so modern about Marlowe's era: you could make it on merit rather than rank. **AND HE WAS PROTECTED BY ROYALTY.** Yes, there's a famous document indicating that he had rendered "invaluable services." **IT HELPED THAT HE ATTENDED VERY GOOD SCHOOLS.** Certainly, and he was an excellent student, too. That is what the ballet is about. The despair of someone who has read the classics and is wondering how to make his mark on the world. **DO YOU MEAN THAT THE STORY IS ABOUT MARLOWE WANTING TO WRITE GREAT LITERATURE?** It's not just about literature. It's also about trying to integrate the two. People often fail at that. That's why the ballet ends as tragically as it does: very ambitious people often make great sacrifices in their personal lives. When Marlowe finally falls in love he knows that it will keep him from everlasting fame and glory. After all, he's just a footnote in history. That's what makes it so interesting to me: how come the biggest guy around, only 29 years old and on top of his game, loses out, while the other guy goes on to write a zillion plays? **WHY DID MARLOWE MAKE SUCH A MESS OF HIS LIFE?** Because he was possessed by some kind of demon. Not a psychological demon, because those don't make for good theater, but a *real* demon. There is a great tradition of artists who made deals with the devil. Marlowe was also a self-destructive guy, not a person you would like as a friend – he had a terrible temper, had to be bailed out of jail, those kinds of things. **YOU'D RATHER NOT TALK ABOUT HOW AND WHY HE REALLY DIED?** There are too many stories and fabrications and it's too long ago to find out the truth. Probably the truth is infinitely more banal than we like to think. I took a sort of romantic approach which reflected what was going on with my own life at the time. **WHAT IF MARLOWE HADN'T DIED SO YOUNG?** This is all academic, but if Marlowe had lived to be 55, maybe he would've

been Shakespeare, and Shakespeare would never have happened. Or maybe he would've revealed himself as a mediocre writer, getting worse and worse. His contribution to blank verse will always stand by itself, however. The fact remains that he died a kind of rock star's death, and in this and many other cultures there is always a fascination with talent dying young. **ISN'T IT DECADENT TO DWELL ON THAT?** Of course it's decadent! It's like singing "I hope I die before I get old." But when you get old, you don't want to die at all! You want to be a wily old guy singing "My Way" and being paid handsomely for it. **DID MARLOWE CHOOSE THE COURSE OF HIS LIFE, MORALLY SPEAKING?** The Devil is here to test our free will. If there was no devil, man would never have a moral choice, he would simply be *good*, because there would be no other choice to make. Marlowe *chose* to engage an agent of a darker force to propel his talent. It comes down to the question of why people want to be great. Ambition is kind of a demonic impulse. Fame and glory should be accidental byproducts. Marlowe is a symbol to me of somebody who chooses fame and glory rather than just good work. It has to do with vanity. We are so often seduced by fame and fortune. **NOW ABOUT YOUR WORK FOR THE MOVIE INDUSTRY HOW DO YOU VIEW YOUR FUNCTION?** First of all, I'm not a novelist – my work doesn't get reviewed in the *New York Times*. I work in the entertainment industry, which is one big circus. I'm just another high wire act, just a cog in the wheel. You can't sit here and take yourself too seriously – that's death. **WHAT ABOUT SINCERITY?** A high wire acrobat is sincere! **WHAT OTHER QUALITIES CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR WRITING?** I can't deny my flamboyant nature. When I was at the San Francisco Art Institute, where you and I both went to school, I realized what kind of a Hollywood guy I really was. I don't want to make little super 8 or 16mm films. Also, my work is by nature to be judged by other people. It's a collaborative process: without director and actors there would be no movie. I'm not sitting someplace writing my "novel." This is to be *used* – it's a blueprint. I'm just a technician, in a way. *The Color Purple* happens to be a fantastic book. I feel very passionate about it, which has made my life a lot easier. **INEVITABLY PEOPLE WILL MAKE COMPARISONS BETWEEN THIS MOVIE AND SPIELBERG'S ADVENTURE FILMS.** It's not going to be a slick adventure

story, I can tell you that! We have been very faithful to the novel: there is a certain message in Alice Walker's book that we leave very much intact. The movie will be about the great drama between men and women, and the oppression of mankind, and the reasons why, and their fears, and all that.

**👤 IS SPIELBERG A WELL-READ MAN? 👤** Very well-read, and he understands the essence of this book – after all, being a dramatist takes a great deal of sensitivity.