

# Scriptwriter broke through the barriers

By CHRIS WATSON  
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**F**RANCES SCHACHT'S voice — a tough, theatrical, New York tumble of words — doesn't exactly match her very feminine, almost fragile, physical self.

She is wearing pink shoes, matching lipstick and fashionable overblouse but the booming voice belongs dockside, giving orders to a gang of longshoremen.

Schacht may have spent a year as a New York model in her younger days, but her heart belongs solidly to the world of theater, scriptwriting and literature.

She was a scriptwriter and theater director long before women were common in the field. She wrote movie scripts, plays and ads. Now, when Schacht is not writing, she's directing book discussion clubs in the area.

Although she declines to divulge her age (she says she is only "a few years older than my son"), she is quite vocal about the details of her career in the world of words.

"I've always been good at anything to do with the stage," Schacht said recently in her Live Oak home, "especially at putting words into action. But I was born at the wrong time. Trying to be a woman writer, I was going against the grain."

With an early introduction to the delights of the New York stage, Schacht and her career cracked open the door for women trying to break into a male-dominated business. It was tough going back in the '50s.

"I remember one job I applied for. It was for Pyramid Productions in New York, writing scripts for the undercover cop show, 'Decoy.' The producer said to me, 'I've always wanted to work with a negro or a woman.' " She chuckled at the memory. "Well, I got the job." Her first script for the series was called "Pink Room

Blues."

Schacht remembers how times have changed for women writers.

"I was a member of the New York Writers Guild at the time and went to meetings regularly. It was a great place to meet men in those days — maybe two women in a room full of men. Nowadays, you go to a Guild meeting and it'll be a room full of women with a couple of men."

It might have been easy to meet men, but it was tough to make money.

Schacht said, "You can make a living on option money, residuals and selling an occasional script (even if they keep it on the shelf), but I was never really commercially clever...except for the movie scripts I wrote with Frank Ray ("She Came to the Valley," "Dracula's Dog," and "Laserblast," starring Roddy McDowell.)"

Schacht also cites the quick successes she had with her ad copy for Max Factor and Jeep Wagoneer. "I loved advertising. I was getting paid for jokes and quips I would do at parties!"

Still, for all the frustrations of competing in a tough business, Schacht enjoyed a number of successes.

Her two children's plays, "Diddlebop" and "The Princess Who Quacked Like a Duck," won prizes. Her adaptation of Georges Simenon's book, "The Snow Was Black," was produced in New York and later made into a French movie. She shared an Obie award for her direction of Arthur Miller's adaptation of Ibsen's "The Enemy of the People," and won awards for her work on "Brecht on Brecht" and Jean Genet's "The Blacks."

"The Blacks," staged around 1960, was a turning point in my career," Schacht said. "My husband and I adapted it from Genet's novel and directed it. The first production of the play starred Godfrey Cambridge, Lou Gossett

Jr., Cicely Tyson, James Earl Jones, Maya Angelou and others."

"I also wrote a play called "Black Hamlet," but I couldn't find a producer for it," said Schacht.

Neither could Schacht find a backer for what she considers her best work — "Rappe," a play about the Fatty Arbuckle scandal of the early '30s.

"My script for "Rappe" went through several versions and several producers and, in the end, it has gone unproduced.

In the early '70s, actor James Coco was looking for an Arbuckle script and I went to New York and was put up at a hotel, met him and the producers, ate at Sardis and knew that this was what I was born to do. But Coco died and the play languished.

"In 1981 or '82, I contacted another producer and once I tried a Scientology-connected group and even shipped it to Lorimar



Frances Schacht says she was born in the wrong era for women scriptwriters.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

"I think, in the end, the script is too critical of Hollywood and freedom of speech to get backers here."

Hollywood has made a tradition of being rough on people. Schacht left Tinseltown about 10 years ago because, she said, "I didn't like the position of being an older, single woman in Hollywood." She cites especially the recent trend requiring writers to pitch their stories in person to producers, a tactic that tends to throw work to the young and attractive, despite qualifications.

In Santa Cruz, Schacht has found a new venue for her literary interests. She keeps herself busy by coordinating and directing book clubs, most recently the Booklovers Club at Branciforte Library.

Starting Sept. 19, Schacht will direct a new weekly book discussion series at the Aptos

Branch Library called Bookbaggers. The first series is titled "Quest for the American Dream." Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller and Joan Didion are among the authors whose works will be discussed.

A special appearance by Jim Faris, a retired Hollywood film director, on Oct. 3 will focus on the role that Hollywood myth-makers had in the evolution of the American dream.

Also, starting Sept. 18 at the Capitola Community Center at Jade Street Park, Schacht will conduct yet another book club.

Beginning Sept. 17, she will lead a theater class at the center called "Memory Theater" which will use memories to create drama.

Drama is something Schacht is sure she can teach as well as write and direct.

"I taught a children's class in creative dramatics for the New

York School District way back when. It was wonderful," Schacht said. "I sometimes wish I'd continued doing that sort of thing."

Schacht also led experimental theater workshops in Greenwich Village in the '60s, eventually staging her own burlesque play there called "Whatever Happened to Sisyphus."

"I haven't stopped writing," Schacht said, "I've done articles for 'Zeitgeist' and I'm working on a book that *may* turn out to be an autobiography."

Whether reading to her heart's content (a childhood desire), discussing books and literature, or writing something new and quirky, Schacht continues to explore the dimensions of her interests.

"Back in the '50s, I bridged a gap for women," Schacht said.

Today, Schacht and other women script writers continue to traverse that bridge of words.