

# Local Boys Make Good

Michael S. Gant

If UC Santa Cruz can be said to have a golden age, it was in the early '70s when film instructor Tim Hunter was programming double bills with a vengeance and student Charlie Haas added an irreverent zing to *The City on a Hill's* art section. Hunter's film noir class featured such underbelly classics as *D.O.A.*, *Touch of Evil* and the devastating duo of *Kiss Me, Deadly* and Sam Fuller's *The Naked Kiss*.

In addition to burrowing from within at *The City on a Hill*, Haas also masterminded the *College V Newsletter*, an experiment in new wave graphics 10 years ahead of its time. Off the hill, he wrote a humor column entitled "Love Is Like an I-Ching in My Heart" for *Sundaz!* in its salad days. These parody pieces were the precursors to his later work in *New West*, *Equire* and *San Francisco*.

It was at Santa Cruz that Hunter and Haas formed a collaboration that has lasted nearly a decade and resulted in a novel, *Soul Hit*, about crime in the record industry; two screenplays, the little-seen *Over the Edge*, directed by Jonathan Kaplan, and *Trapdoor*, a computer crime thriller; one novelization of *Over the Edge*; and has now blossomed with the release of *Tex*. With a screenplay by Hunter and Haas and direction by Hunter (his feature film debut), *Tex* has garnered glowing reviews from the critics in New York, where it played at the New York film festivals.

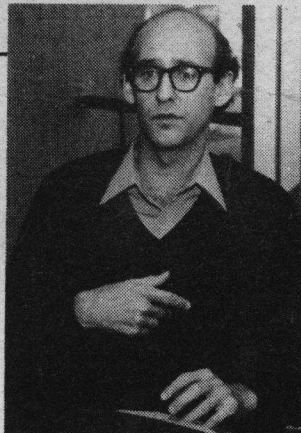
*Tex* opens Friday at the Del Mar and, to promote the film, Hunter and Haas came to Santa Cruz last week for a session with the press at the downstairs coffeeshop of the Dream Inn. Dressed alike in dark pull-over sweaters, drinking the same drink — Myer's Rum on the rocks with a twist — and even looking alike (it's known as the Evans and Novak Effect), Haas and Hunter described the genesis of *Tex*.

"We wrote *Over the Edge*, a film about teenagers gone nuts in a condo suburb," said Hunter, "and we interviewed a great many kids in researching the project and discovered that, if they read at all, they read the books of S.E. Hinton. So Charlie and I decided that five million readers can't be wrong, and we read the three books she had in print then."

While plugging their *Over the Edge* novelization ("with photographs"), they met Hinton's editor at the Bookseller's Convention. "I approached her editor in a private pavilion," Hunter remembered, "and asked Hinton had anything new coming out. After two days of logical warfare on my part, she admitted that she had a few galleys for *Tex*. We thought it was a good offshoot of what it would be right for Matt [Dillon]."

The story to Dillon's agent, who agreed to let Hinton project for Dillon. A year later, learning that Dillon wanted to, in Hunter's words, "broaden the scope of the action features," he showed the idea to the studio. "And," said Hunter modestly,

it was easy — *Tex* was optioned to Warner Bros. for six months and almost became a TV movie, but, after years of trying, Hunter and



**MINIE.** Ex-Santa Cruz cinema entrepreneur Tim Hunter discusses the experience of transforming S.E. Hinton's novel *Tex* into a Walt Disney film.



**AND MOE.** Former *City on a Hill* arts staffer Charlie Haas, who co-wrote *Tex* with director Tim Hunter, talks about his other projects just cookin' on the back burner.

PHOTOS: JOE DANIELS

Haas had their shot at a major film.

Made on location in and around the book's actual settings, Bixby and Tulsa, Oklahoma, *Tex* was made on budget (\$5 million) and on time (seven weeks) in the summer of 1981, but not without some close scrapes. According to Haas, "It was on schedule and just down to the wire of the threatened Director's Guild strike, which did not happen. But it was a period when every production was going crazy to finish by the July 1 deadline." The script was completed just before the writer's strike, but luckily Hinton, who wasn't a member of the Guild, was available for dialog revisions.

The only other problem on location was getting a drink in Tulsa, where you have to become a card-carrying member of every private club, i.e. bar, you go to. As Haas told it, "Susie [Hinton] and the other people we met in Tulsa walk around with a wallet that as soon as its released expands to the thickness of the LA phone book and inside is this wad of cards. You deal them out depending on what place you're at."

Hinton was an enthusiastic participant on the set of *Tex*, taking a small part as the typing teacher, lending her horse Rowdy, and teaching Dillon how to ride. Hunter and Haas made no major changes in the novel, preferring to let the story work on its own terms. "To me," said Haas, "the highest compliment came when Susie said that she knows there's a lot of dialog in the picture that she didn't write but that she can't remember anymore which is hers and which is ours."

Elaborating on the job of adapting, Haas continued, "Part of the task of adapting a book you like involves a taming of one's ego. There are lots of occasions when you have to admit that the author already has the best fix on a scene or the best couple of lines."

*Tex* was the perfect choice for an adaptation, added

movies

Hunter. "My advice to anyone adapting a book for the first time is to find one like *Tex* that is 160 pages long and breaks down neatly into 40 scenes."

On the nature of their collaboration in general, Haas said, "We've used every method there is: being in a room together, one guy typing and the other composing lines out loud; being hundreds of miles apart, one of us drafting big chunks and the other tearing it up. But inevitably it comes down to one marathon session."

Haas and Hunter currently have a computer caper film called *Trapdoor* ready to film. The script has been rewritten innumerable times, including once for Wim Wenders, and is finally scheduled for production by Disney with Hunter directing. Haas already has had experience at Disney on the subject of computers, having been called for some quick doctoring on the script for *Tron*. His interest in computers, however, goes all the way back to his "Shifting Parameters in Disappearance and Memory," a remarkable story linking Jimmy Webb's songs to a plot to make information disappear from the world's computers (published in the 1976 anthology *Universe 6*).

The two continue to work together, but both have independent projects in mind as well. For Hunter, screenplays are just a means to direct, and he is currently developing a remake of the 1944 Robert Siodmak suspense, *Phantom Lady*. Haas has just finished his first solo script, *Back on Top*, a black screwball comedy about the auto industry. For Haas, however, there is a literary side to his work that can't be expressed in screenplays. He is still working at what he calls his "smart-ass journalism," reviewing country and western music for *Esquire*. He is also in the midst of some extended fiction pieces.

On the lighter side, Haas and Hunter have an option on two science fiction/fantasy novels, *Don't Bite the Sun* and *Drinking Sapphire Wine*, by Tanneth Lee. They hope to hold down the special effects budget on these futuristic teen epics by making them in "a funky new wave way with '50s sets made from Melmac and using boomerang ashtrays as the dominating signifier." □

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