



ful to Irving's distinctive blend of broad comedy and fine-gauge grief, expertly directed, and graced with outstanding performances by both Bridges and Basinger.

"I love the film," says Irving, not a man to gush unnecessarily. He concedes he might have been less open to some of Williams' proposals had it not been for his own experiences trying to bring his



novel *The Cider House Rules* to the screen, a grueling, 13-year process that ultimately won him an Oscar for best screenplay. "You have to be open to the radical idea," he says. "I'd been open to these ideas myself."

While *The Door in the Floor* is not a literal adaptation of his novel, it remains true to his intentions. "It's about loss," he says, "and who recovers from what they lose and who doesn't recover so well."

"I feel we've put a real challenge to the audience, by giving them humor with the drama," says Hope. "And not just drama, but *trauma*." Another challenge, he says, is the character of Ted Cole, whom Irving describes as a "charlatan"—a lazy writer, a meddling father and a horrible husband, yet not without his redeeming features, especially as played by Bridges. "He's a good man and a bad man both," says Hope. "These characters don't exist in studio films. Nor do middle-aged people who are still sexual," which both Ted and Marion are with a vengeance, although not with one another.

Ted is a womanizer of long-standing, and the grief-stricken Marion embarks on an affair with Eddie that is torrid and maternal by turns.

"I think Jeff Bridges' performance is mesmerizing," says Irving, "and Kim Basinger is also terrific." Ted and Marion are "difficult characters to gain an audience's sympathy," he adds, "but I think they both do it."

Hope considers the scarcity of such characters (and of films that understand life as tragedy and comedy both) to be points in *The Door in the Floor's* favor. "I have a tremendous faith that there's an intelligent audience out there," he says. "Film audiences have been watching the same kinds of stories for a hundred years. They see through them, and they're ready for something far more challenging and original than a traditionally structured linear narrative."

## Turning Exeter Inside Out

*The Door in the Floor* is not, technically speaking, John Irving and Ted Hope's first collaboration. They first "worked" together years before, in 1978, when Irving was briefly Hope's wrestling coach at the Academy. This was, significantly, the same year that *The World According to Garp* was published, and the novel's tremendous success cut short Irving's promising career as an Exeter wrestling coach.



"He coached for three or four weeks," recalls Hope, "and then not long after that he was on the cover of *Time*." He pauses to laugh. "When I later reminded John that he'd been my coach, he said, 'You know, Ted, you couldn't have been very good, because I really don't remember you.'"

Hope may not have been a standout wrestler, but he did arrive at Exeter a fully formed film buff. As a young boy growing up in Merrimac, MA, he regularly accompanied his mother to Cambridge's hallowed Brattle Theatre to see classic Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Marx Brothers movies. Exeter furthered this education, thanks to an ambitious film society that flourished on campus in the days before the advent of videos and DVDs. "So every weekend I saw a great film," he says, dark and complex works

like *A Clockwork Orange*, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Taxi Driver* that permanently stamped his taste in films. As a producer, he continues to gravitate toward material that "tries to help us understand someone we wouldn't normally be drawn to," be it a Travis Bickle or a Ted Cole, and "shows such characters to be more complicated than we might initially assume."

John Irving had his own cinematic epiphany while at Exeter, which he describes in *My Movie Business*, his memoir about the trials, tribulations and occasional triumphs of having his novels (including *Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* and *The Cider House Rules*) adapted for the screen. He writes, "I saw my first Ingmar Bergman film in the Thompson gymnasium on a Saturday night. The soundtrack was incomprehensible, the subtitles frequently out of focus. We sat on folding metal chairs on a basketball court, and the film was in black-and-white. But it was Bergman. Everything in my life as a moviegoer has been downhill from there."

There are, Irving points out, limits to what Exeter can teach its students. Near the beginning of



*Although The Door in the Floor makes several significant departures from his story, Irving (at left, with director Tod “Kip” Williams) pronounces himself thoroughly satisfied with the result. “Kip had the right ideas,” he says, “and he was a tireless craftsman.” Says Ted Hope: “Film audiences have been watching the same kinds of stories for a hundred years. They see through them, and they’re ready for something far more challenging and original.”*

*A Widow for One Year*, Eddie O’Hare removes the Exeter sweatshirt he’s wearing and reverses it, intuiting—correctly, as it turns out—that is he entering “a world where Exonians were well advised to put their Exeter experiences behind them (or turn them inside out).” For starters, Irving says, “Exeter doesn’t prepare anyone for the kind of experiences the characters in my novels generally face. It prepared me intellectually; it taught me the value of working hard. I’m eternally grateful to the Academy for its rigorosity. I’m a hard worker, and I *had* to be at Exeter—needing five years to complete the four-year program, don’t forget. But Exeter doesn’t ‘prepare’ you for sorrow, or loss, grief, dysfunction—all the rest. No school does.”

## Nurturing a Film

After Exeter, Ted Hope went to Lewis and Clark College in Portland, OR, but he freely admits to spending as much time at the local film collective watching Truffaut films as he did in class. Before long, he dropped out to do grassroots organizing with the Public Interest Research Group (PIRG), the consumer watchdog organization. The experience would later prove invaluable, he says, because “political organizing is very similar to producing. You’re working with a large group of people toward a single goal and with a very specific timeline. People aren’t being paid what they’re worth, so you have to find other ways to motivate them.”



When he did return to college, it was to film school at New York University. His timing couldn’t have been better: The independent film movement—that is, films independent of the Hollywood studio system not only in their financing, but also their vision—was just beginning to take off. Film school is also when Hope decided his talents lay in producing rather than directing, in “finding a way to get

the movie made” (job one: raising several million dollars from private investors) and then “nurturing” it each step of the way.

“My partners and I take a very different approach to producing,” he says. Rather than making the deal and bowing out, “we’re there from the very beginning to the very end, because the deals you make determine the film you make. So I’m on the set all the time. I’m in the editing room. I’m involved with the film’s distribution, marketing and promotion. We treat each film as a hand-made product.”

It’s a system that seems to work. First with *Good Machine*, the production *(continued on page 94)*

the potential to exert on their countries' futures a most positive influence. Both employ a pedagogy based on the conviction that if one "respects the pupil" and puts him or her at the center of the educational dynamic, learning will be vigorous and lasting. And finally, both create a structure that has these capable students and their well-prepared teachers sitting together at an oval table and learning in a quintessentially democratic way.

In a country that is lifting itself out of a past damaged by countless invasions and occupations and recently set loose from a system that put much authority in agencies beyond its own borders, it is inspiring to see a school that has a democratic pedagogy at its heart. It is a matter of their, and our, good fortune, and the confidence and conviction of three men, that PEA and AAT have the connection that they have, a connection that has allowed our school to contribute to the development of education in a distant but important country of the post-Soviet world. ■

## The Movie in Their Minds

(continued from page 33)

company he co-founded with James Schamus in 1991, and more recently with his partners Anne Carey and Anthony Bregman at their new company, This is that, Hope has "nurtured" some of the most highly regarded films of the past 15 years, beginning with his early work with directors Ang Lee (*The Wedding Banquet* and *The Ice Storm*) and Hal Hartley (*Trust*). Since then, he has worked with a veritable A List of innovative filmmakers, including Michel Gondry and Charlie Kaufman (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*), Todd Solondz (*Happiness* and *Storytelling*) and Nicole Holofcener (*Lovely and Amazing*). Fourteen of his films

have been selected for the Sundance Film Festival, and his three best-known—*21 Grams*, *American Splendor* and *In the Bedroom*—earned a total of eight Oscar nominations between them.

### Opening 'The Door'

One reason for this long string of adventurous work, says Hope, has been a company ethos of "being able to admit you're wrong," and to risk what at first glance looks like certain failure. It was in this spirit that Hope conceded director Tod Williams was perhaps not so crazy after all—especially when Irving's agent encouraged them to contact the author.

Thus began a two-man letter-writing campaign, with Hope reminding Irving of their brief acquaintance and Williams (who's known as Kip) laying out his vision for the film. And then: *nothing*. "Months went by," says Hope, until fate intervened in the form of the 1999 Toronto Film Festival, where the bill of fare included not only Hope's latest project, Ang Lee's *Ride With the Devil*, but also Irving's, *The Cider House Rules*, both of them starring an up-and-coming young actor named Tobey Maguire.

Says Hope, not without understatement: "Good fortune and timing play such a role in the film business."

Says Irving, "Ted asked Tobey to introduce us (actually, reintroduce us) at a party at the film festival. Ted told me about Kip and his idea of how to make *A Widow for One Year* as a film. I liked Ted, and subsequently met with him and Kip." The three men struck a deal: Irving would sell the filmmakers the rights to *A Widow for One Year* for a dollar, and in exchange they would give him final approval of the film's title, its screenplay and its cast. "We had an agreement that we would agree about everything—and if we didn't, something had to change," is how Irving puts it. "It

was a three-way agreement and we stuck to it."

And so Hope and his partner Anne Carey set to work raising the \$7 million it would take to make the film, and Williams set to work on the screenplay. While Irving did not write the screenplay, he did work closely with Williams on its many drafts and on the editing process. "Editing a film is more like writing a novel than writing a screenplay is, and I am good at that process," Irving observes. "Kip had the right ideas and he was a tireless craftsman; he just kept improving."

In *My Movie Business*, Irving writes that "most films are exercises in compromise," and one of *The Door in the Floor's* key compromises is a shift in the story's focus from Ted and Marion's young daughter, Ruth (who grows up to become the widow of the book's title), to the embattled couple themselves. "My sympathies in the novel are entirely with Marion, less so with Ted," says Irving. "Kip's sympathies are, I think, more evidently with Ted," particularly by the film's wrenching later scenes.

Williams took the film's title from one of Ted Cole's children's stories, which, like all of his works, is an eerie tale inspired less by childhood innocence and more by adult nightmares. Irving pronounces himself well satisfied by the changes his story has undergone, adding, "If you don't know the difference between a novel and a film, you shouldn't be there."

Where there's precious little difference is in the high quality of both Irving's novel and the film it inspired—a notable exception to the rule that movies make hash out of good books. Perhaps that's because, as Ted Hope suggests, "this is a film that asks you to think and feel at the same time." All of which makes the ending to Hope and Irving's five-year collaboration a happy one indeed. ■