

MAKING IT REAL

How Mike Nichols re-created comedy and himself.

BY JOHN LAHR



we do now, Mr. Success? she said.

Nichols, who has a sharp American wit but courtly European manners, bit his tongue. All those Mr. Success years would have been hard to explain to anybody if I tried, Nichols, now sixty-eight, says. What I really wanted to say to that envious woman was Don't worry. There's still nothing happening inside me. I'm not experiencing success or anything much.

But feelings aren't facts. From the moment Nichols made his name, in the late fifties, as the lanky deadpan half of the comedy team Nichols and May, he took up residence in success. As early as 1961, a letter addressed to Famous Actor, Mike Nichols, U.S.A. reached him. And, by the seventies, Nichols represented the high-water mark in not just one but three areas of American entertainment. As a comedian, he improvised routines with Elaine May which are among the treasures of American humor; as a stage director, beginning in the early sixties, he had a string of commercial hits that made him the most successful Broadway director since George Abbott; as a film director, he made the bold, intelligent *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *The Graduate* (1967). The latter, for which he won an Academy Award and which both summed up and influenced his generation, got him off the Hollywood blocks perhaps faster than any director since Orson Welles.

Nichols has made seventeen films in the last three decades. Success, however, as Winston Churchill said, is never final. On May 3, 1999—just one day short of sixty years since Nichols, then Michael

Once, in the early seventies, Mike Nichols was sitting in a commercial jet as it took off from J.F.K. Moments after it was airborne, the plane went into what Nichols recalls as an unnervingly steep bank. Everybody looked at each other. Nobody knew what it meant. The pilot came on the intercom. We are experiencing—he began in his best Right Stuff drawl. Then, suddenly, he said, Just a minute! The mike went dead. In the long silence that followed, the people on the airplane started to panic. A woman a few rows in front of Nichols turned around and looked squarely at him. What do

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD AVEDON

Mike Nichols, opposite, with Elaine May, in 1960, and, above, last November.



"Those D's are misleading."

Igor Peschkowsky, the son of a White Russian migr and a German beauty, arrived in New York by boat from Germany he found himself at one of those occasions he likes to call a ratfuck, at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall, where more than three thousand citizens had gathered to celebrate his lifetime achievement in film. The first part of the evening was a cinematic homage. Just before it began, Nichols and his wife, Diane Sawyer the most observed of all observers took their seats in the front row of a box just beside the stage and surveyed the illustrious guests below, among them Richard Avedon, Steve Martin, Itzhak Perlman, Stephen Sondheim, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, and Barbara Walters. Nichols assumed the runic

crooked smile Elizabeth Taylor describes as that smile that tilts up at one end, that you can read so much into a shared joke, a certain skepticism. Then, one by one, various grandees of American popular culture Meryl Streep, Paul Simon, Elaine May, Harrison Ford, Buck Henry, Nora Ephron, Candice Bergen, Art Garfunkel, Matthew Broderick, Nathan Lane led into the box, too, and anked the evening's sovereigns. They were part of Nichols's story; later in the ceremony, in their encomiums from the stage, they would individually swear allegiance to him like courtiers to a king which, in a way, he is.

He knows that all the Versailles stuff is bullshit, says the screenwriter Buck Henry, a close friend who has scripted

three of Nichols's films, including *The Graduate*. He knows when his ass is being kissed, and he knows when it isn't, although it is most of the time. He casts a baleful eye on all of it, but in his heart he wants it and needs it. In its de-luxe panoply, the Lincoln Center extravaganza fulfilled one of Nichols's life-long fantasies. He's on an island that belongs to him, manned on the turrets by men with machine guns, another close friend, Richard Avedon, explains. People can only get in with a passport, and then only his friends. The need for a seamless armor is the legacy of Nichols's friendless, despairing refugee childhood. When he arrived from Berlin, at the age of seven, he was totally bald; he'd been permanently denuded of all body hair at the age of four, a reaction to a defective whooping-cough vaccine. He knew just two English sentences I do not speak English and Please do not kiss me. He'd lost his homeland, his language, his class pedigree, and, by the age of twelve, he would also lose his father. I was a zero, Nichols says now. He adds,

In every way that mattered, I was powerless. Nichols sought something to counteract his paralyzing sense of inadequacy and to disarm a world that he saw, and still sees, as predatory and cruel. The most useful thing is if your enemy doesn't know he's your enemy, Nichols told me, setting out the rule of dissimulation by which, over the years, he has kept the world in his thrall. Never let people see what you want, because they will not let you have it. Never let anybody see what you feel, because it gives them too much power. You're probably better off not showing weakness whenever you can avoid it, because they'll go for you. With its aspects of detachment, generosity, and control, the imperial posture has served him well.

On the night of Nichols's gala, Elaine May couldn't resist a wink at his jerry-built crown. So he's witty, he's brilliant, he's articulate, he's on time, he's prepared, and he writes, she said. But is he perfect? He knows that you can't really be liked or loved if you're perfect. You have to have just enough flaws. And he does. Just the right perfect flaws to be absolutely endearing. And my three minutes are up, but if I had another four seconds I'd tell you every one of those flaws.

Nichols is a purveyor of aplomb, a

rare commodity these days. He lives like a pasha and long ago took up the kingly pastime of breeding Arabian horses. (In 1972, he had the national-champion stallion and mare, Elkin and Elkana.) Over the years, Nichols, who calls himself a Dionysian who gets tired easily, has also been romantically linked to a variety of goddesses—goddesses of literature (Robert Graves's Black Goddess, Margot Callas, who was Nichols's second wife), goddesses of glamour (Suzy Parker), activism (Gloria Steinem), society (Jackie Onassis), and the media (Sawyer, who became the fourth Mrs. Nichols, in 1988). Well before Nichols grew into his grandiosity, his hauteur had him typecast in college plays as the Dauphin and the emperor. With his long Russian nose, he emits a kind of mandarin snottiness—what Woody Allen calls his superb contumely, adding,

It's supercilious in the way we all wish we had the genius for. He's a nice version of George Sanders in *All About Eve*.

At a dinner party in the sixties, Nichols corrected Norman Mailer, who had declared that his favorite line of poetry was Dylan Thomas's "Do not go quietly into that good night." Actually, it's gentle, Nichols said. Quietly wouldn't scan, would it? Mailer rounded on Nichols, calling him a royal baby, a put-down that Nichols thought was pretty good. (In jollier circumstances, Sawyer has been known to refer to her husband as His Royal Cuteness.)

At the finale of the gala, Nichols had planned to go onstage and say to the assembled, "Well, that's all very well and good, but what about my humanity? What about my *fucking* humanity?" But Art Garfunkel scuppered the joke by speaking earnestly to that very point. So when Nichols stepped before his audience—a tall man with big, gnarly hands and an indulged belly that precedes him by some inches—he resorted to another gripe. "Where the hell is Dustin Hoffman?" Nichols said. "He was nothing when I found him. His straight face caught the audience off guard and made the joke ambiguous."

"It's like the monster not showing up at the tribute for Dr. Frankenstein," he continued. "Actually, I suspect that his not showing up is related to my not going to his A.F.I. tribute, although that was all the way across the country. . . .

Well, it's all blood under the bridge now."

But blood has a way of sticking to things; even the solvent of Nichols's wit can't wipe out certain dark spots. In his movie career, things have not all gone Nichols's way. There was a string of flops in the mid-seventies: *Catch-22* (1970), *The Day of the Dolphin* (1973), *The Fortune* (1975), and *Bogart Slept Here*, which Nichols closed down in production; there followed a seven-year hiatus before his next film, the excellent *Silkwood* (1983). Some of his later movies—*Heartburn* (1986), *Regarding Henry* (1991), *Wolf* (1994)—were more or less rumbled by the critics. In 1995, after Nichols had shown the final cut of *The Birdcage* (which went on to gross more than a hundred and eighty million dollars worldwide) to his editing team on Martha's Vineyard, he sat down with them for a celebratory meal. "I was very emotional and very angry. I couldn't speak all through lunch," Nichols told a friend. "The film was so good, so strong. I realized I'd had no inkling of my anger at the people who had written me off. My reaction, instantaneously, was 'Fuck you, bastards. You thought I couldn't do this anymore. Well, look at this.'"

So, here at his retrospective, Nichols both masked and displayed his vindictive triumph. As a parting shot, he announced that he was leaving the next day for Los Angeles, to go into preproduction on his new film—a comedy called *What Planet Are You From?* And he left the audience with a slightly altered version of W. H. Auden's acid envoi—a ruler's deadpan rebuke to those young upstarts who think they could do it better—and who might dismiss the proceedings as merely geezer aggrandizement:

Death takes the innocent young,
As poets have frequently sung,
The rolling-in-money,
The screamingly funny,
And even the very well-hung.

In mid-July, I caught up with Nichols in his current kingdom, Sound Stage 15, at Culver Studios, in Culver City, where a broken ankle and crutches—the



result of a spill on the set—in no way impeded his show of good spirits. Life is difficult and fucked up and complicated, Nichols says. The cutting room isn't. At the studio, his power is absolute. "I really need to control it. Every aspect of it, every nuance of the reading. How long every second of every shot is," he says. "Partly because that's the job, and partly because I just have to. I'm happy when I'm controlling it and uncomfortable when I'm not and crazed when it's out of control."

On the set, Nichols's wit serves him well both as a social lubricant and as an equalizer. In conversation, he lays out his colorful word hoard like a vendor at a bazaar—a delightful abundance of erudition, playfulness, and surprise, which helps take the odor off his Eeyore-like nature. His voice, which is nasal and comes from the back of his throat, can wring all sorts of sardonic music from the sounds of words. A retreat? How *moving*. "It's not a sweat lodge, is it?" he says, taking a call on his portable phone as the crew prepares for a scene with Garry Shandling and Ben Kingsley.

Come and see me. We can have a *tiny* retreat in my trailer.

While the shot is being set up, Nichols hobbles away toward his trailer, which is parked opposite the sound stage; the makeup man standing at the shadowy threshold of the building cautions Nichols about the ledge he's standing on. "Thank you, Roy," Nichols says.

Where were you when I fell in that hole? Among the myriad problems facing Nichols on this particular cerulean day, as he clammers up the steps to his trailer, is what to get the cast as an end-of-production present. "My assistant came up with a silver vibrator," he says. "I'm not sure. Maybe if it has *Ars Gratia Artis* on it. Inside, the trailer is dominated by photos of his handsome children: Daisy, thirty-five, who dubs movies into French; Max, twenty-five, who is a record-company A. & R. man; and Jenny, twenty-three, a student at Brown—and by food (Sees Candies, jelly beans, nuts, chocolate-chip cookies). Nichols, who has never met a calorie he didn't like, is, as Candice Bergen says, a poster child for unhealthy living. Because he's currently immobilized and can't climb up onto the space-station set, a gizmo called a god box has

been installed in his trailer, just opposite the sofa. A microphone allows Nichols to talk directly to his players as he watches them. It's annoying, he says. It's like wearing a condom. You're there and you're not there.

What Planet Are You From? is about an alien, played by Shandling, who, as part of a plan to dominate the universe, is sent to earth to impregnate as many women as possible and take over the planet from within. Nichols inspects a replay of the just completed scene in which Ben Kingsley, the leader of Shandling's planet, taps him for the procreative mission. The success of our planet's domination of the universe rests in your hands, Kingsley says, in his gravest British Received Pronunciation.

Now, if you'll come this way we'll arrange your transfer and attach your penis. A big, chesty laugh rumbles through Nichols's body. Kingsley was put on earth to say that line, he says, and laughs some more. Nichols has as many kinds of laughs as he does ironic intentions, but his high-pitched Big Laugh is like no other. His eyes widen, his body stiffens, his pale skin reddens as hilarity

crashes over him. In that moment of wipeout, all of Nichols's power, self-consciousness, and royal command vanish into childish delight. This wheezy, teary collapse has been captured on record (Nichols and May at Work); and anyone who has been in its force field knows the strength of its infectiousness.

It's incredible when you get it, Neil Simon told me. It inspires you to show him more material to get it again.

In the next shot, which is the movie's finale, Shandling goes into a righteous harangue. Why are we taking over earth? Is that what it's about? More, more, more? and Nichols stops him in mid-flow. It's a moment from an operetta, he says. We don't want that gesture. It's too Jewish. Speech, like the portrayal of a character, is in the details; Nichols watches over it with vigilance.

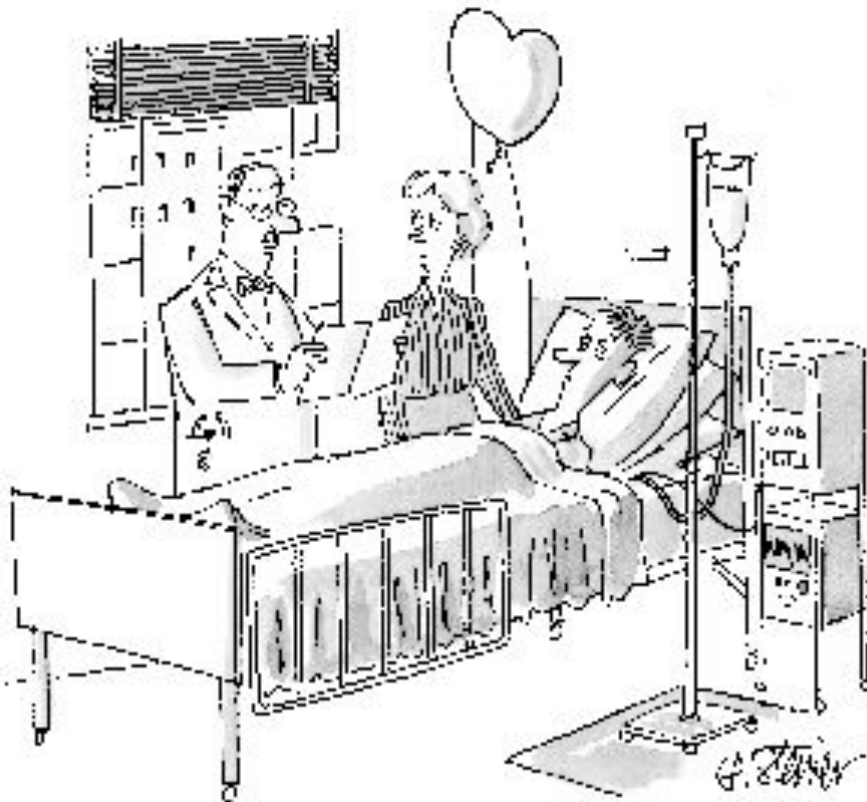
I constantly have to edit the things I want to say, he adds. Shambling and I get into this kidding thing, but then it gets a little bit out of hand. He's called Shambling, is he? I ask. Nichols fixes me with a lidded glance. Well, now and then, he says. Nichols continues, He's playing the game of student with the

master, which is partly meant to disarm me. He's not without self-knowledge. He knows how to use me to make certain things happen to him in scenes. The game is useful to us both.

But the previous week, for what Nichols said was the first time in his directing career, he had screamed at his star, who is also the film's co-author. Nichols knows that he can be withering. There was a moment during the filming of The Day of the Dolphin when Nichols saw himself becoming a tyrannical bastard. I remember that I told the D.P. director of photography toward the end that I was not proud of the way I had treated the guys and I wanted to apologize, he says. And he, a very mild man, said, It's too late for that. It took my breath away. It made me realize that I had to put the brakes on completely. Because nobody can fight back, the director has an absolute obligation to treat people decently. By his own admission, he had gone totally nuts at Shandling, in an outburst that sent people scurrying off the set. He explains, Garry came in and didn't know the scene, although he'd written it. Annette Bening, of course, knew it perfectly. After it was over, I said something to her about her character. Bening plays a ditzy recovering alcoholic, with no knack for picking Mr. Right. Garry said, I think she should be kooky. I said, You do? Her clothes are kooky, the set is kooky, her lines are kooky—you want her to act kooky, too? I said, Why don't you come in prepared and do your own work?

It was mean, Bening told me. He was attacking Garry inappropriately. It was really out of line. Shandling apologized for being unprepared, and Bening then met with Nichols in his trailer to defend Shandling's right to have a creative conversation, a point that Nichols conceded when he, in turn, apologized to Shandling. In Nichols's remorse, Bening saw a force superego.

He's not as generous to himself as he deserves to be, she says. He's got a voice in him that's very harsh, and unnecessarily so. In his surprising anger—he now says he was much angrier than seemed warranted—Nichols saw the dim racial memory of rage, that little boy in himself who is still angry and whom he constantly struggles to keep down. He's the one, Nichols



"We can give you enough medication to alleviate the pain but not enough to make it fun."

says. He's somewhere saying, Don't fuck with me. And I can't stop him.

All the shit was in the beginning, Nichols says of his life. Hitler or his voice, broadcast from speakers on dockside lampposts literally saw Nichols and his three-year-old brother, Robert, off to America in 1939. Nichols remembers not being allowed to board the Bremen, which was leaving from Hamburg, until the traffic-stopping speech was finished. The brothers, each with ten marks in a purse around his neck, made the journey alone across the Atlantic. Their mother, Brigitte, was ill and stayed behind for a year and a half before rejoining the family; their doctor father, Paul, who had left Russia for Germany after the revolution in 1917, had gone ahead to New York in 1938, just before the Nazi takeover, to set up a practice on the prosperous Upper West Side. On their first night off the ship, Nichols remembers seeing Hebrew writing on a delicatessen and asking his father in German, Is that allowed? He also remembers watching his brother throw a tantrum while his father pretended to call the police on the pay phone to deal with him. He had no experience as a father, Nichols says. He had no idea what to do. Paul saw his boys only intermittently during their first year in America. He placed them with an English family, some patients of his who agreed to care for them while he was establishing himself. They were awful, Nichols says. They would kiss their own children good night, then shake our hands. We'd get a spoonful of milk of magnesia and go to bed. Things didn't improve much when the Peschkowsky family was reunited. My parents fought all the time, Nichols recalls. They would have divorced if my father hadn't died something that my mother immediately forgot. Much later, Nichols learned that his father was impotent with her and not with many other women. Both parents had a series of lovers. There were always other people, in Germany and here, he says. It was just the way things were.

Nichols felt landlocked in the family, trapped in the battle between his warring parents. A lot of the contention was about him. I wouldn't go to school. I wouldn't get up in the morning. I an-

swered back, Nichols says. He had a mouth, which made both his schoolmates and his family wary of him. My father wasn't too crazy about me, Nichols says. I loved him anyway. One of the things I regretted for a long time was that he died before he could see that he would be proud of me. I was actually more what he wished for than he thought. He adds, He could rage. (Nichols still remembers his father, in the heat of an unhappy family moment, saying to him and his brother, I'll be glad to get rid of you two.) But he also told funny stories, and he used to dance for us in his underwear. He did routines at parties that people loved to hear. In later life, Nichols was told by the impresario Sol Hurok, who had been one of Paul's patients, You're not as funny as your father. And it's through his father that Nichols feels he understands the stoic bravado of Chekhov's characters. He was the Russian as entertainer, he says. What I loved him for even when he wasn't noticeably loving me was that he had great vitality and joy of life. Paul never let his darkness show in public. I feel linked to him in many ways,

and that's one of them, Nichols says.

By contrast, Brigitte, who was thirty-four when her husband died, at the age of forty-four, became a nightmare of accusation, someone who collected injustices. She was one of those people who would hold you responsible for everything that happened to her and how bad she felt now, Nichols says. He would try to kid her out of her misery. Everything wounded her, he says. She was always wounded to the quick. I raised you so you could say that to me? Thank you very much, I deserve that. It went on for hours, days.

Brigitte, who had no profession, no money, no proper English, and only a few friends, would go to the Stanwood Cafeteria, on Broadway, and sit alone for hours. Over the years, she worked in a bakery, a bookshop, even set up a translation agency to support her boys. But after Paul was gone they found themselves plummeting well below the level of middle-class gentility to which they had been accustomed. Although Nichols blocked out the degree of their humiliating poverty, his brother subsequently reminded him of bug-infested



"If I won forty-seven million dollars in the lottery, I wouldn't change a thing. Not at first."

apartments and of their mother giving up to the point where she didn't do the laundry. We weren't clean. She always had some mysterious illness, Nichols adds. When he went home after school to their drab rooms at 155 West Seventy-first Street—one of those tiny apartment houses with podiatrists on the first floor—he frequently found Brigitte propped up on her living-room sofa bed (the boys shared the bedroom) with a table of pills, maybe a hundred and fifty bottles of medication, and the phone, on which she always was.

In time, Nichols discovered that he could make people laugh by telling stories about his mother. In fact, Nichols and Mays' definitive sketch, *Mother and Son* (Someday... you'll have children of your own. And, honey, when you do, I only pray that they make you suffer the way you're making me. [*Sobs.*] That's all I pray, Arthur. That's a mother's prayer) was inspired by one of Brigitte's lethal phone calls. As Nichols recalls, it went,

Hello, Michael, this is your mother. Do you remember me? I said, Mom, can I call you right back? Literally. And I called Elaine. He and May were playing at the Blue Angel then. I said, I have a piece for us. I told her the line. She said, We'll do it tonight. And we did it pretty much the way it is now. She had the identical mother.

Before he found a way to make light of his difficulties, Nichols was swamped by them. From his first day at the Dalton School, on the Upper East Side, the clouds of exclusion and isolation glowered over him. The kid was as far outside as an outsider can get, says Buck Henry, who was in his class. He was Igor Peschkowsky when he was at Dalton. He did not speak English. He wore a cap all the time. Nichols says, I remember being on the school bus in New York and saying, What means *emergency*? By the time he reached high school (the progressive school Walden, from which he graduated in 1948), Nichols had mastered English, had a make-do wig, and had learned the idiom and style of his peers, but his assessment of himself during these searing, painful years was that he was the most popular of the unpopular kids. That was cast in bronze, that's where I was chained in the

galaxy forever, he says. I thought about revenge a lot in those days.

A lazy and lackluster student, Nichols had a quick mind and a formidable intellectual inheritance. (His maternal grandmother, Hedwig Lachmann, did the translation of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*—that Richard Strauss used for his opera; his grandfather Gustav Landauer, among whose best friends were Martin Buber and B. Traven, was a writer turned activist, who was a leader of the German Social Democratic Party, and whose brutal execution by the Nazis had been the reason for the family's exodus.) Nichols filled his solitude with activities that took him out of himself and into exotic other worlds. At sixteen, he went with a date to the second night of Elia Kazan's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. We just sat there, Nichols says.

We didn't talk. We couldn't believe there was such a thing. He adds, I just wanted to be around theatre. He also read voraciously (all of Eugene O'Neill by the age of fourteen, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*); he was a constant moviegoer; he hung out in Central Park and at the Claremont Riding Academy. I got to exercise people's horses; sometimes, when people were thrown off, I would catch the horses on the bridle path and ride them back. Animals calmed Nichols; unlike his classmates, they were responsive, unself-conscious, and unable to pass judgment. The refugee ear is a sort of seismograph for how one is doing, Nichols says. At high school, he explains, I *heard* what they thought of me—nebbish, poor boy and what they thought of each other. A thousand tiny victories and defeats in an ordinary conversation. I didn't know what to do with it.

To this day, even though Nichols wears a wig, the intrusive, objectifying eyes of others continue to be a threat. Staring is something that still makes me absolutely nuts, he says. He thinks



"I know what the audience wants." Nichols in New York in 1960, inset, and last year.



of the public as something to be controlled and tamed. The first person to come up to me at a party is in danger to this day, Nichols says. My reflex is to attack the first couple of people. I can't stop. Diane is right there, taking off the edges, xing it. By the third or fourth person, I can be friendly. To Nichols, the audience has always personified them—the annihilating mob of his childhood, whom he characterizes as the beast with too much power. He says, I was so impaled on what people thought. I had to train myself away from that. I never had a friend from the time I came to this country until I got to the University of Chicago. I was seventeen.

He ended up there by a fluke: it was one of the only schools in America that didn't require the College Boards, and Nichols hadn't taken them. Once I got there, I had a very specific and powerful sense of Oh my God, look, there are others like me. There are other weirdos.

The publisher Aaron Asher, who shared college digs with Nichols, says, We were all freaks. We were way ahead of the country. There was sex. There was dope. There was a subculture. Asher was just one of Nichols's new friends, who were refugees or first-generation Jewish intellectual guys. When Nichols mentioned to Asher that his grandmother had written the libretto for Strauss's *Salome*, Asher joked, Oh, really? Was she Hugo von Hofmannsthal? Nichols says, I was looking at somebody who knew who Hofmannsthal was and that he wrote libretti for Strauss. No such thing had ever happened to me before.

The first person Nichols met at registration was Susan Sontag; they struck up a lifelong friendship. I thought he was terrific, Sontag says. I adored him from the start. He was totally alive and incredibly verbal. We talked about books, about feelings, about how to get free of our pasts. Because we were interested in theatre, we were interested in observing people. I would happily have become his girlfriend physically, except I was intimidated by the hair problem and felt he was untouchable. (Thirty years later, Sontag confessed to Nichols that she couldn't accept the scars from her mastectomy: I have this thing, and every time I take a bath I'm horrified. He said, Susan, now you know how I have felt

all my life.) Asher characterizes Nichols's look as something out of a German Expressionist movie, but says that, despite the strangeness of his appearance, he did very well with the girls. He was courtly, and he was well read, which got you a long way at that university.

Nichols, who had begun therapy, was also deeply depressed. I would spend long times in my room and just not come out, he says. Sometimes I would step over all the dishes and the Franco-American spaghetti cans and hang out with some friends, then go back to my lair. Nichols d.j. ed a popular show of classical music and chat at WFMT, but his depression almost cost him the job.

He was funny and knowledgeable but totally unreliable, says Asher, whose cousin owned the station. They red him a number of times.

I couldn't be a *person* that many hours a day, Nichols explains. I needed still need a lot of time lying on the bed absolutely blank, the way I assume a dog is in front of the fire. A persona takes energy. I just needed a rest from it. Not to be anything in relation to anyone else.

When Nichols did emerge from seclusion, he worked up his losses into a kind of legend. According to one of his theatrical cohorts, quoted in Janet Coleman's *The Compass*, Nichols behaved like a princeling deprived of his rightful fortune. Nichols was so poor that he took to eating the leftovers from the coffee shop where the director Paul Sills was then a waiter. He rattled his tin cup, Nichols's friend Hayward Ehrlich, now an associate professor of English at Rutgers, says. When Mike appeared, you knew that he needed a cup of coffee or a sandwich or something. It became his way of relating to people, to have them sort of help him out of his impoverishment. I think Mike loved to magnify his sense of adversity so that in some way he could triumph over it.

Much to Nichols's surprise, during his sophomore year he found himself near the center of the in-group and a minor celebrity. The theatrical talent pool at the University of Chicago was extraordinary: Sills, Ed Asner, Severn Darden, Anthony Holland, Zohra Lampert, Barbara Harris, Gene Troobnick. Nichols directed his first play, Yeats's *Purgatory*, with Asner, and he performed in a number of plays,

among them *Androcles and the Lion*, *St. Joan*, and *La Ronde*. He played Jean the valet in a production of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, directed by Sills.

He wasn't the working-class man and couldn't come close to it, Sills says now. Nichols agrees; it was, he says, a pathetic, awful production. He remembers this evil, hostile girl in the front row staring at me throughout the performance. I was about four feet away from her and she stared at me all through it, and I knew she knew it was shit, and there was no way I could let her know that I knew. A few days later, the show mysteriously got a rave review in the *Chicago Daily News*. Nichols recalls rushing up to Sills on the street with the paper; Sills was with the girl who had unsettled Nichols from the audience. He scoured the review, while the girl read over his shoulder. Ha! she said, and walked away. Nichols, who was already toying with the notion of a theatrical career, had just met his future: Elaine May.

Some weeks later, on his way back from his disk-jockey gig, in the spring of 1954, Nichols caught sight of May in the waiting room of the Illinois Central's Randolph Street Station.

Their friendship began with an improvisation. May I sit down? he asked. In a thick Russian accent, May replied, If you *veesh*. Off she went, Nichols says. She started us on that. They played out the scene, which Nichols characterized as half spy, half pickup, all the way home. I think I went home with her and she made me her specialty, which was hamburger with cream cheese and ketchup—the only thing she cooked, Nichols recalls. She didn't know conventional dishes. She was utterly a rebel. That was part of the fun of it.

May was also a femme fatale. Everybody wanted Elaine, and the people who got her couldn't keep her, Nichols says. But, even at their first meeting, which led to a brief romance, he remembers feeling that we were safe from everyone else when we were with each other. And also safe from each other. He goes on, I knew somehow that she would not do to me the things she'd done to other guys. I knew she wouldn't lose interest and move on. I knew instantly that everything that happened to us was ours.

May's life had been as painful and

complex as Nichols. It's almost hard to convey how neurotic we were, Nichols says. Although she had dropped out of high school at fourteen—the only thing she enjoyed there was diagramming sentences—May was, as Edmund Wilson noted in his diary when he fell under her dark-eyed spell in the late fifties, something of a genius. She had grown up in a nomadic acting family, spending a good part of her childhood playing a little boy named Bennie in a travelling Yiddish theatre run by her father, Jack Berlin. According to her second husband, Sheldon Harnick, who wrote the lyrics for *Fiddler on the Roof*, the death of May's beloved father when she was ten left her to a future of apprehensive relations with men. She was married for the first time at sixteen; by eighteen she had a child, Jeannie Berlin, who was about four years old when Nichols met May and was being raised in Los Angeles by May's mother. By the time she reached Chicago, May had studied acting, performed a hillbilly act under the name Elly May, and written advertising copy. May, who saw herself primarily as a writer, was unofficially auditing courses at the University of Chicago and trying to develop a screen treatment of Plato's Symposium. (She once convinced a philosophy class that everyone in the Symposium was drunk and that that was the point of Plato's discourse.) The only safe thing is to take a chance, May always told Nichols, who was ravished by her daring and her quirkiness.

Nichols and May had talent, but, more important, they had chemistry. They were quick; they were guarded; they were crazy. They were also—insanely judgmental snobs, bound together, Nichols says, by tremendous hostility to everyone else but never to each other. (May once said, according to Nichols, that if somebody told her that I had burned down her house with her whole family in it, she would say, Oh, I must ask Michael why he did that.) I feel in opposition to almost everything, May, who no longer gives interviews, said in a Profile of the duo published in this magazine in 1961. Like Nichols, she used wit as a pesticide, and her juicy good looks were a particularly disconcerting contrast to her sharp tongue. Once, Nichols recalls, when two men followed her down the street making kissing sounds, May

TAKES

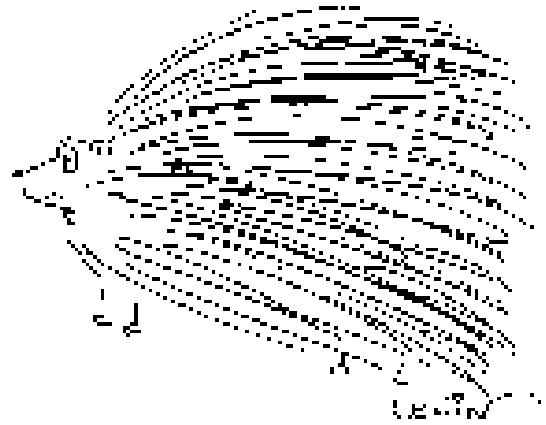


Then came a year when I felt the urge to push on still farther and explore the vast marshland beyond the River Oredezh. After skirting the bank for three or four miles, I found a rickety footbridge. While crossing over, I could see the huts of a hamlet on my left, apple trees, rows of tawny pine logs lying on a green slope, and the bright patches made on the turf by the scattered clothes of peasant girls, who, stark naked, romped in the shallow water and yelled, heeding me as little as if I were the discarnate carrier of my present reminiscences. On the other side of the river, a dense crowd of small, bright-blue butterflies that had been tipling on the rich, trampled mud and cow dung through which I

had to trudge rose all together into the spangled air and settled again as soon as I had passed.

After making my way through some pine groves and alder scrub, I came to the swamp. No sooner had my ear caught the hum of Diptera around me, the cry of a snipe overhead, the gulping sounds of the morass under my foot than I knew I would find here quite special arctic butterflies, the pictures of which I had worshipped for several seasons. And the next moment I was among them. Over the bilberry shrubs, with their dim, dreamy blue fruit, over the brown eye of stagnant water, over moss, over mire, over the fragrant racemes of the lone and mysterious marsh rocket, a dark little Fritillary, bearing the name of a Norse goddess, passed in a low, skimming flight. I pursued rose-margined Sulphurs, gray-stippled Satyrs. Unmindful of the mosquitoes that covered my forearms and neck, I stooped with a grunt of delight to snuff out the life of some silver-studded lepidopteron throbbing in the folds of my net. Through the smells of the marsh, I caught the subtle perfume of butterfly wings on my hands, a perfume that varies with the species; it may be vanilla, or lemon, or musk, or a musty, sweetish odor difficult to define. Still unsated, I pressed forward. At last, I saw I had come to the end of the swamp. The rising ground beyond was a paradise of lupines, columbines, and pentstemons. Mariposa lilies bloomed under the ponderosa pines. In the distance, evening cloud shadows dappled the olive green of slopes above timber line, and the gray and white of Longs Peak.

—Vladimir Nabokov
"Butterflies," June 12, 1948



"I think it's overkill."

turned on them and said, What's the matter? Tired of each other? Fuck you! one of them shouted at her. May turned and faced the guy. With what? she said.

Nichols dropped out of college in 1953, and, in 1954, he decamped to New York to study the Method with Lee Strasberg. I have decided that if I don't make it as a nervous young man, he wrote to a Chicago friend, I will wait and become like Robert Morley, who is clearly the funniest man in the world. But in 1955, with no prospect of work, he returned to Chicago with the promise of twenty-eight dollars a week as part of a new company called the Compass Players, of which Sills and May were founding members. The goal of the Compass, which would evolve into Chicago's legendary Second City, was to do away with conventional plays and make theatre by improvisational means. I was terrified of improvising, Nichols says. I didn't even know what it was. I hated it, and I was very bad at it. Nichols cried in his scenes for months because that's what I thought I'd learned from Strasberg. Paul and Elaine kept me going. The fact of Elaine's presence kept me doing it.

In the first successful scene they did together, Nichols played a riding instructor, and May his pupil. We both realized as we got into the middle of the scene that I would get to stand in the middle of the stage and watch her cantering as both horse and rider around me. During the scene, a member of the cast ran into the bar where the other actors were congregated, shouting, Come

quick! Mike has a character! Nichols reacts, What is implied in that story and it was true for the first time in my life is affection. They had some affection for me. I began to understand that I could be kidded, and people could be fond of me, and that this would all be a pleasurable thing.

As intellectual high-wire acts go, there is no riskier or more astounding enterprise than going out in front of an audience and creating something out of nothing. You're showing off how smart you are, how good you are, Buck Henry says. You have the pleasure of having not only performed it but written it at the same time. Improvisation—a process, Nichols says, that absorbs you, creates you, and saves you—allowed the actors to stay on the edge of emotion and character without connecting deeply to their interior lives, and this suited both Nichols's and May's private natures. I would never have been a performer without her, and I don't think she would have without me, Nichols says. Elaine and I are, in some weird way, each other's unconscious. Nichols made the shapes; May filled them in. She was shockingly, endlessly inventive. She could go on and on—I couldn't, Nichols says. I did my jokes, and then I was through.

Within the Compass Players, May could be funny with several different actors, but Nichols could be funny only with her. I never did a good scene of any kind with anybody else, Nichols told Jeff Sweet, in *Something Wonderful*

Right Away, an oral history of the Compass Players. For me, it depended on a certain connection with Elaine and a certain mad gleam in either her or my eyes when we knew something was starting. The mad gleam meant, as he explained to me, Oh, fuck, I know where you're going. That's a great idea you've just had, and when you get there I'll be ready. That focus—reminiscent of a parent's empowering gaze—was inspiring. We had to figure out something or we would disappear, each of us, Nichols adds. (He would later find a similar containing attentiveness in Diane Sawyer. All of her is available all the time, he says.) With May, Nichols could drop his mask. *I interested me when I was with her,* he says. It wasn't only that she was so great but that when I was with her I became something more than I had been.

Onstage, in their own version of *Truth or Dare*, Nichols and May kept upping the ante on each other. Once, in an improv about an egotistical d.j. and a starlet called Barbara Musk, Nichols quizzed May about her next movie. My latest motion picture is . . . called *Two Gals in Paris*. It is the life story of Gertrude Stein, May said. What do you play in the picture, sweetheart? Nichols asked. Well, I was really just lucky enough to get the part of Gertrude Stein, she said. I had heard that Gertrude Stein was going to be played by Spencer Tracy, Nichols said, maneuvering her into a tough spot. Only as a child, May shot back. When the conversation got

onto the soundtrack of the movie, May said that she'd recorded the title song. Nichols promptly asked her to sing it. On the spot, May ad-libbed an entire song, which ended:

There was dashing Dmitri, elusive Ivan
And Alyosha with the laughing eyes.
Then came the dawn
The brothers were gone
I just can't forget those wonderful guys.

The University of Chicago proved the perfect place for nurturing their particular ironic and informed voices. It was the most referential community that I think ever existed in this country, says Nichols, who improvised entire scenes in the style of writers suggested by the audience. At the Compass, we could drop Dostoyevsky as a name and get a laugh. We were living in the context in which the referential joke was just the highest currency. They were also coming of age in a safer, quieter place than New York.

Chicago is not a city of fashion, nor is it full of pride and excitement over its art, Nichols says. They were very calm about Compass. They came. They laughed. They went home.

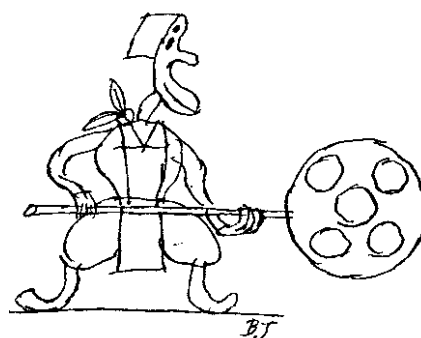
Nichols and May were beginning to find resources in themselves that they hadn't known they had, including the ability to make anger work for them.

Rage is the best engine, of course, if you have a tremendous gift to employ it properly, Nichols wrote to a friend. Once, when Nichols was performing a sketch about pretentious snobs at a private party, the actor playing the effete host offered to put on a record. Would you like to hear The Four Seasons? he asked. Perhaps just Winter, Nichols replied. To freeze his ass was a pleasure, says Nichols, who found that with jokes he could cow the shit out of the public. When a joke comes to you, it feels like it's been sent by God. He adds, What it is, really, is discovering your unconscious.

There were other discoveries. When Nichols was onstage, even the curse of imagining what others thought of him became an asset: I could hear what the other actors were thinking, where they were going, what the audience was thinking. Nichols also learned the Aristotelian things about the building of a scene—conflict, theme, resolution. He and May found ways to grab the opposite. There had to be a core to a

scene, Nichols told Jeff Sweet. It didn't matter how clever the lines were. If they weren't hung on a situation, you were only as good as your last line. . . . But if you could grab a situation, whether it was a seduction or a conflict or a fight, once you had that spine, then things could come out of it. And when the jokes were found, Nichols husbanded them. If there was a laugh to be gotten and Elaine didn't set up the feed line, Mike would work with her until she did, another Compass member, the comedian Shelley Berman, said. He did everything but lasso her. For a while, according to Janet Coleman, Nichols and May worked with Berman, a trio that May suggested they call Two Cock-suckers and Elaine. I actually liked Shelley, Nichols said. But one day he came offstage and said, Hey, guys, Mike had three scenes in that set, and I only had two. It was a whole new idea in Eden to count. The group was finished in six months.

Nichols and May themselves nearly foundered in 1958, when they were working in St. Louis, where a new Compass Players venue had been launched. Nichols had recently married the Chicago TV personality and singer Pat Scot (Isn't it a beautiful first wedding? May said at the ceremony), who joined him on weekends. During the week, on a strictly platonic basis, Nichols and May shared a room, which she vacated when Scot arrived. On those days, May stayed with another company member, Del Close. Nichols was jealous of Close, not for romantic reasons but because May was so much a part of his identity that he couldn't share her. I persecuted the shit out of Del, Nichols says. Nothing could stop me. Elaine finally said to the producer, I can't stand it anymore—you've got to re-Michael. Nichols was summarily red.



Some weeks later, from New York, where he had gone with Scot (though, as May had predicted, the marriage didn't last much longer), Nichols called to ask May if she'd like to audition with him for the New York agent Jack Rollins. Rollins handled such cabaret talent as Harry Belafonte and Woody Allen. They were immediately astounding. They were complete, Rollins says, of the first time he set eyes on the team, at his office in the Pierre Hotel. He is Mr. Practical. She is insanely creative. But Mike is the one that made the act live in this world. By the following Tuesday, Nichols and May were playing the Village Vanguard.

A couple of weeks later, we were on Steve Allen, Nichols says. Then we were on Omnibus, and we were very famous. The whole thing took about two months. After the Omnibus show, Nichols remembers calling May at 4 A.M. to say, What do we do now?

As McCarthyism, the Cold War, and racial unrest made their generation anxious, Nichols and May struck a new disenchanted chord in American life.

Nobody was doing any humor about post-Korean War young people, that urban generation, says the cartoonist and playwright Jules Feiffer, who, when he first heard them, didn't dare laugh, because I was afraid of missing something. He adds, Humor was Bob Hope still. When I saw Mike and Elaine, suddenly you felt not just that this is funny but that this is true. Woody Allen, who wanted to write for Nichols and May, says that comedians like them were touching on some kind of truth—truth of character, social truth, truth of wit. And, suddenly, part of that whole new sense of truth was that they wrote their own material. With Nichols and May, Jewish angst, Freud, literacy, irony, and sex were ushered into the discourse of mainstream comedy. They, along with Mort Sahl, Jonathan Winters, and, later, Lenny Bruce and Woody Allen, were the renegades who led comedy away from the ersatz to the authentic.

The nice thing is to make an audience laugh and laugh and laugh and shudder later, May said. The frisson was the shock of recognition. Nichols and May had the uncanny ability at once to comment on character and to fill it from within. They were like music, Steve

Martin says, referring to the swift intimacy of their overlapping rhythms, the deft interplay of May's soft, breathless voice and the reedy clarity of Nichols's sound. For instance, in their sendup of public outrage over Charles Van Doren and the Twenty-One scandal:

NICHOLS: Thank heaven for the investigation.
MAY: Oh, yes.

NICHOLS: When I feel worst I say to myself, "At least the government has taken a firm stand."

MAY: Oh, yes. Well, they can't fool around with this the way they did with integration.

NICHOLS: No.

MAY: This is a . . .

NICHOLS: . . . moral issue.

MAY: Yes.

NICHOLS: A moral issue.

MAY: Yes! Yes! It is a moral issue.

NICHOLS: A moral issue.

MAY: And to me that is so much more interesting than a *real* issue.

Smart is not necessarily funny, Martin says. You can go through a whole evening of smart and have laughed completely perfunctorily. But Nichols and May could be approached from either a dopey or a smart place. For example, their classic sketch about two teen-agers smoking and making out in the front seat of a car contained two pieces of inspired physical business: May in the middle of a passionate kiss opening her mouth to breathe and emitting a puff of smoke (a joke Nichols later used in *The Graduate*), and the clinching lovers trying to pass a cigarette from one trapped hand to another.

However, sometimes smart alone could bring down the house. Nichols began his sendup of Tennessee Williams's high-pitched, hard-drinking Southern playwright called Alabama Glass with the playwright explaining his newest work to the audience. Before the action of the play *begins*, Nichols drawled, Nanette's husband, Raoul, has committed *suicide* on being unjustly accused of *not* being homosexual.

Most of the time, people thought we were making fun of others when we were making fun of ourselves, Nichols says. Pretentiousness. Snobbiness. Horniness. Elaine was parodying her mother, as I was mine, and a certain girl-iness, irritatingness in herself. He adds, It was utterly freeing. And redeeming. In the teen-ager sketch, for instance, Nichols and May were sending up the cheerleader and the football star,

those high-school paragons they never were but now got to play. We *were* those people, and it healed something, weird as it sounds, Nichols says. Onstage with May, Nichols felt, I could be anybody I needed to be. I used to have a mental image of cracking a whip when I was talking to the audience. I could control them with jokes. Offstage, the person he presented as Mike Nichols was another version of his stage persona—witty and apparently able to handle everything. We'd like to say a few words about adultery—it's coming back. That's who I was. He adds, You start imitating somebody who is calm about all that. You imitate it long enough, and it becomes true.

But, while his public persona stanchd old anxieties, success brought new ones. May cared more about process, Nichols more about results. She was always brave, he says of her desire to improvise.

But I became more and more afraid. I wasn't happy with getting paid a fortune for something and not having tried it out in advance. By the late 'fifties, Nichols was earning more than half a million dollars a year. He adds, The audience didn't give a shit whether you were improvising or not. They'd come to see good comedy.

The team's creative differences came to a head in their brilliant Broadway show, *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May* (1960), which I saw during its yearlong run. We were irreplaceable, Nichols says. We never got a negative review. We never had an empty seat. Everybody loved us. Everybody felt they had discovered us. But discovery—the fearless adventure of creating in the moment—was gradually being leached out of their performances by the repetition of set routines. May grew increasingly unhappy. Sometimes she'd be late. What is so difficult? Two hours out of twenty-four. It's a perfect job. It wasn't that way for her, Nichols says. We had huge fights about it. I never could understand why she found it so difficult.

The most stunning moment of the evening—a kind of augury of their collapse—was a sketch called *Pirandello*, a twenty-minute exercise in which Nichols and May began as two little kids, playing at insulting each other like Mom and Dad, then became Mom and Dad yelling at each other, and then turned into a

pair of actors having trouble with each other onstage. Suddenly, in a terrifying shift, Nichols and May were in the middle of some ugly private squabble. At one point, in what Buck Henry characterizes as a moment of unbelievably intense embarrassment for everyone, Nichols turned to the audience and said, My partner and I . . . May said, Well, screw this, and started to walk offstage. Nichols grabbed at her, ripping May's blouse as she pulled away. She started to cry.

Michael, what do you think you're doing? she said. I'm doing Pirandello, Nichols said. Breaking into smiles, they took their bows. But at one performance Nichols and May actually came to blows: Nichols hit her back and forth across the face, May clawed at his chest until it bled, and the curtain had to be brought down.

We cried together. It didn't happen again, he says. I think, in many ways, I persecuted her. I went on at her, This is too slow, this has to go faster.

The end was slow in coming. In October, 1962, Nichols took the lead in May's play *A Matter of Position*, which opened in Philadelphia. It was sort of about me, which she never quite admitted, Nichols says. But, with him on the stage and May in the audience, the balance of their relationship irrevocably shifted. Suddenly, Elaine was not next to me, doing it with me, but out there judging me, Nichols says. It was horrendous. The play itself added to the atmosphere of *asco*. As the *Philadelphia Sunday Bulletin* wrote, Those members of the audience who had not already beat a hasty retreat before the final curtain, as many did, were left with a sensation of numbness that was too far down to be attributed to heartburn. Nichols and May were no longer two against the world. May was looking for a replacement for Nichols, and Nichols was saying to people, Get her to cut the play or I'm leaving. The play died in Philadelphia; and, although they didn't exactly speak the words, so did their friendship. It was cataclysmic, Nichols says.

Mike was in a state of deep depression, says Robby Lantz, Nichols's theatrical agent at the time. He really wasn't functioning. He went to bed. Period. Nichols was now half of a comedy team. He had lost his best friend, his livelihood, and the scaffolding of his identity. Mike has no tolerance for failure, says

a former collaborator who tried to rally him after May's departure. I didn't know what I was or who I was, Nichols explains. His predicament was summed up one afternoon on Park Avenue by Leonard Bernstein, a member of the deluxe set he'd become part of. Bernstein put his arm around Nichols. Oh, Mikey, he said, you're so good. I don't know at what, but you're so good.

What Nichols was good at, it turned out, was something that his acting classes with Strasberg, his improvising, and his comedy act with May had all been a preparation for: directing. In 1961, in New Jersey, he'd directed a collection of Jules Feiffer cartoon sketches, *The World of Jules Feiffer*, with music by Stephen Sondheim. It was clear to me that he was extraordinary, Feiffer says. But it was not clear to the producing fraternity or to Nichols. As an apprenticeship, Lantz sent him on what Nichols calls the lamest possible job, to direct Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and play the Dauphin in Shaw's *St. Joan*, at a Vancouver theatre festival. Every night at midnight he called and said, Get me out of this. I don't want to do this, Lantz recalls. I said, This is precisely what the doctor ordered. And so it proved. The Broadway producer Arnold Saint-Subber was shopping for a director for Neil Simon's *Nobody Loves Me*. Although Saint-Subber didn't have enough confidence to guarantee the tyro director the Broadway show, he was prepared to let Nichols try out the play in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Nichols had only seven days to mount *Nobody Loves Me*, which was later retitled *Barefoot in the Park*.

After the first reading at Saint-Subber's house, when none of the actors laughed, the notoriously nervous Simon, known as Doc because of his ability to swiftly rewrite a line and make brilliant comic fixes, wanted to call off the play. Nichols was unruffled. The play was so light, so sweet, so funny, that my job was to make it real, says Nichols, who impressed Simon with his extraordinary calmness. I was absolutely confident about what everything should be and where everybody should be. Nichols told his talented cast—Robert Redford, Elizabeth Ashley, Mildred Natwick, Kurt Kasznar—to treat the play as if it

were *King Lear*. Let's do it as though we don't know what's going to happen, Nichols remembers telling the cast. Let's not let them know it's funny.

But it was Simon who didn't know that his play was funny. At the first Bucks County rehearsal, he sat outside the rehearsal hall. Suddenly, I heard a roar, Simon says. Thank God, they must be up to a good part. I went inside. It was Mike telling them a story during the break. Then we went back to the play—no more laughs.

Doc said, Let's call it off. This is not a play. I never thought it was a play, Nichols recalls. I said, Let's decide after the first preview. Let's just see how it is with an audience. Of course, they yelled and screamed and fell out of their chairs. Doc never worried again. Nichols adds, I had instant maturity.

This marked the beginning of what is probably the most successful commercial partnership in twentieth-century American theatre. We were obsessed in the same way, Nichols says of Simon. I could wake him up at two in the morning and say, I've figured out what's wrong with the third act, and he would

curse me and then come down and meet me in the lobby to listen to it. It was the joy of discovering things together.

As a comedian, Nichols had watched himself become what he calls a show-biz baby. I was narcissistic, he says. I would get mad. I bitched about our billing. I did all the things I dislike. Comedy is the only work in the world in which the work and the reward are simultaneous. Comedians get it on the spot. They get the laugh. It's very corrupting to your character. But as a director Nichols got to play adult instead of baby. There was something about serving something that wasn't me, Nichols says. Within fifteen minutes of starting rehearsal for *Barefoot in the Park*, he had a life-changing revelation: the experience of taking care of others made him feel taken care of. I had a sense of enormous relief and joy that I had found a process that both gave me my father back and allowed me to be my father and the group's father, he says.

Nichols's love for his actors was palpable; he created a protective environment for them. They're giving everyone the right to assess, evaluate, criticize ev-



"Have you ever wanted something so bad that you'd actually save up the money to buy it?"

everything about them—their noses, their asses, their intelligence, their worthiness or lack of worthiness, he says. They're really out there. Nichols was a shrewd father—clever about wielding his authority and about maintaining boundaries. During *Barefoot in the Park*, Redford came to Nichols in a quandary: he was being upstaged by the showy Elizabeth Ashley. "I can't bear it," he told Nichols. "Every night when I kiss Ashley, she kicks her leg up behind her. I feel like I've been used. I'm embarrassed."

"Why don't you do it, too?" Nichols suggested. Redford did as he was told and got a huge laugh; Ashley promptly stopped her upstaging.

Some of Nichols's charges could be notoriously bumptious. Sometimes he tamed them with his high-definition humor. Once, during a heated rehearsal of *The Odd Couple*, Walter Matthau looked out at Nichols in the auditorium and said, "Mike, can I have my cock back now?" Props! Nichols said. With other wayward actors, like George C. Scott, he knew when to be politic. During the rehearsals of *Plaza Suite*, Scott disappeared for three days. "We're in the middle of a scene, and George walks in. Collar up—it's winter—hands in coat pockets. He's just standing there looking at us," Simon recalls. "I look at Mike, and I'm anxious to hear what he's gonna say. Mike said, 'Hi, George.' We're on Act II, page twenty-one. On the other hand, Nichols could be strict about certain kinds of behavior. At an early rehearsal of *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, the cast, which included Peter Falk and Lee Grant, was blocking a scene on the stage of the Plymouth Theatre. One of the actresses said, "Mike, if she stands over there, I don't think this part of the house is gonna see me," Simon recalls. Mike turned and whispered to the producer, "Fire her."

Nichols's authority rested, in large part, on his unique understanding of the audience. Onstage, and later in film, his work sought—some would say too eagerly—to speak to the audience in a popular way. At its best, this sensibility produced *The Odd Couple*, one of the century's classic comedies. At its most indulgent, it allowed Robin Williams, as Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* (1988), to break the play's artifice of isolation and ad-lib with the paying cus-

tomers. The experience of living in front of the audience for all those years in Chicago did something to me, Nichols says. It gave me some closeness to them, some trust. His sensitivity to audience reaction was the issue in a dramatic falling-out he had with David Rabe, whose play *Streamers* was probably Nichols's greatest artistic triumph—a beautifully staged and terrifying barracks tale of homosexual baiting. When it came to Rabe's next play, the powerful *Hurlyburly*, Nichols explains, "I was desperate for him to cut. I kept saying, 'I won't do this to the audience. I could not get him to see the show from the audience; he only saw it from the light booth. Rabe, who finally went mute in protest (He couldn't reach me. I was not listening,' Rabe told me), stayed with the show until it opened but spoke hardly a word to Nichols. Nichols won the argument and the cut play was a success, but it cost him their relationship."

Improvisation had given Nichols another invaluable directorial impulse: "To damn well pick something that would happen in the scene—an Event. As Nichols explains it, the Event in any scene subliminally seeks an agreement with the audience on the human experience. While you're expressing what happens, you're also saying underneath, 'Do we share this? Are you like me in any way?' Oh, look, you are. You laughed!" The building of this agreement through observation and detailed comic business was Nichols's signature: Art Carney, in *The Odd Couple*, suddenly single and so nervous on his first date that when he lights the woman's cigarette he closes his Zippo on it; the newlywed Elizabeth Ashley, in *Barefoot in the Park*, who knows nothing about housekeeping, holding a match to a log in the fireplace, or slamming from room to room in a passionate argument with her husband while simultaneously undressing.

Nichols has a gift for making things real. During the tryouts for *Barefoot in*

the Park, he and Simon stood at the back of the theatre watching a scene in which the bride, after a week of marriage, screams that she wants a divorce.

"I said to Mike, 'I don't think we should be watching this,'" Simon recalls. He said, "Why not?" I said, "It's too personal, what they're doing on the stage. And Mike says, 'Good, I'm glad you like it.'"

Between 1963 and 1984, Nichols chalked up about a dozen Broadway hits in a row, half of them with Simon.

Over and over again, he'd say when everybody was getting nervous, "It's only a play. They're not going to be waiting for you in front of your house with torches," recalls Simon, whose hit play *The Sunshine Boys* was a script that he had abandoned until Nichols encouraged him to complete it. But one thing about theatre did make Nichols nervous: seeing his stage business and his contributions to scripts go into movie versions without remuneration. He was the first director to demand, and get, a share of the author's royalties, which, when added to his director's royalty and his piece of the subsidiary rights, quickly made Nichols a very rich man. (According to his accountant, if all his stock and film income were lost, he could still live comfortably on his production royalties.) "I wasn't pleased with giving it to him, but I can't argue with it," Simon says. "I would rather have him do it and have the play be great. I never worked with anyone in my life—nor will I ever work with anyone—as good as Mike Nichols. And, when you talk about percentages, what Mike asked for was more than made up for by what I made on *The Sunshine Boys*."

Money played a large part in how Nichols measured his achievement. He always pushed with agents—"I speak for us all: more money, more power, more billing," Robby Lantz says. Eventually, the demands became cruel. Artists in the theatre should not take from each other things that are not necessary. But Nichols, who had almost been wiped out in his first show-biz incarnation, was building an unassailable second career. "The butterflies in my stomach won't stop uttering until I have thirty million dollars," the producer Lewis Allen overheard Nichols telling Lillian Hellman. "He's ruthless when he wants to be, or sometimes maybe even when



he doesn't want to be, Lantz says. He doesn't let anything stand in his way.

Nichols was also avid for artistic excellence, which he needed power to protect. He learned this lesson in his first taste of Hollywood, in the mid-sixties. Elizabeth Taylor had chosen Nichols to direct her in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, even though she had never seen or read the play: she trusted, she said, Nichols's sense of the tragic, which she'd intuited from their friendship. And it was Taylor whom Nichols invoked when Jack Warner, reversing production plans, insisted on shooting in color. As Nichols recalls, I said, Mr. Warner, it's impossible for several reasons. The sets are built. Elizabeth's thirty-three years old—her makeup will never withstand color. How can she go from thirty-three to forty-six and have us believe the makeup in color? But Warner insisted. The screenwriter and the producer, Ernest Lehman, whom Nichols sardonically nicknamed Slugger, said nothing.

Well, O.K., I'll tell you what, Nichols told him. You make it in color. I'll go home. I like it at home. Warner immediately conceded: All right, black-and-white, he said. After that, he treated me very kindly, Nichols says. Until he threw me off the picture at the end. When it was mixing time, he saved time and trouble and just had his crew mix it.

But even here Nichols had unexpected leverage. Each night from the set, the editor, Sam O'Steen, would play him the sound mix over the phone and Nichols would give him notes on what to change. Finally, Nichols got word to Warner that he wanted to cut a deal. Warner was worried that the film, which was about adultery, drunkenness, and brutal family battles, would not be approved by the powerful Catholic Legion of Decency. In exchange for being allowed back on the set, Nichols came up with a plan to deliver the Legion: When the Monsignor sees the picture, Jackie Kennedy will sit behind him. When it's over, she will say, How Jack would have loved it! Jackie Kennedy did as her friend asked; Warner got the Legion's blessing; and Nichols duly finished his film, the first film ever for which all of the four leading players were nominated for Oscars.

Nichols, whose film technique is not showy, is a director's director. He tends

TAKES

When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine-and-urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, *What will happen to all that beauty?* For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah's table and watched the baby, the women, and the men, and we talked about God's or Allah's vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then?* I could also see that the intransigence and ignorance of the white world might make that vengeance inevitable—a vengeance that does not really depend on, and cannot really be executed by, any person or organization, and that cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, *Whatever goes up must come down.* And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*

—James Baldwin
Letter from a Region in My Mind,
November 17, 1962



to get actors to give him their nest hours, Steven Spielberg says, citing Kathy Bates's long monologue in *Primary Colors*. For Nichols, who himself gave a tour-de-force performance in Wallace Shawn's *The Designated Mourner*, at London's Royal National Theatre in 1996, the director's job is to help the actors turn psychology into behavior. When Nichols talks to actors and to students at the New Actors Workshop, which he founded with Paul Sills and George Morrison, in 1988, he is generally oblique, offering up examples from his own life to clarify a theatrical moment. You kind of just free-associate all day long, says the writer-director Nora Ephron, who worked with Nichols on *Silkwood* and *Heartburn*. Then suddenly you get something that actually is good enough to find its way into the thing you're working on. The veteran director Billy Wilder says, Mike's scenes have a kind of inner content, which the audience feels and follows. He's very lucid. What you're looking for every day is one little surprise, Nichols told Charlie Rose about directing. It's like seeding a cloud and hoping it will rain.

The process requires patience, luck, and a gentle touch. Once, during the casting of *Carnal Knowledge*, Jules Feiffer, who wrote the script, told Nichols that he was worried about putting the twenty-three-year-old Candice Bergen in the lead. Can she act? Feiffer asked.

Mike said, She'll act for me. And she did. In his recent biography of Edward Albee, Mel Gussow quotes Richard Burton (who played the harried professor in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) on Nichols. He appears to defer to you, then in the end he gets exactly what he wants. He conspires with you rather than directs you, to get your best, Burton said.

Nichols's goal is to match the actor to the part. If I can cast the right people and figure out the things they should be doing in the scene, they don't have to do anything but show up, Nichols says.

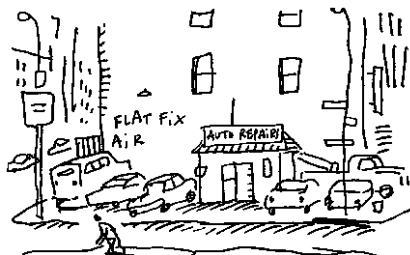
Nobody has to act. Over the years, Nichols has made some particularly daring, less than obvious choices: Art Garfunkel in *Carnal Knowledge*, Adrian Lester in *Primary Colors*, Hank Azaria in *The Birdcage*—but the outstanding example of inspired casting is Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, since Hoffman was both unknown and physically

wrong for the preppy Benjamin Braddock, a Wasp college athlete who has an affair with one of his parents' friends.

There is no piece of casting in the twentieth century that I know of that is more courageous than putting me in that part, says Hoffman, who considers the film the most perfect movie I've ever been part of, adding I was a paralyzed person. I had come from a paralyzed background—the suffocation of that family. I was not acting.

What Nichols saw in Hoffman—a dark, Jewish, anomalous presence—was, of course, himself. Through improvisation, Nichols had learned to treat yourself as a metaphor; Hoffman gave him the same opportunity in film. If the metaphor is powerful, it's always underneath you and you're always surging it. You're always serving it, says Nichols. Even Hoffman's whimper, Nichols says, was my little whimper when Jack Warner would tell a joke—in fact, people had to tell me to try not to whimper when he told jokes, that he would notice. Hoffman remembers Nichols taking him aside when he was listless in front of the cameras, a couple of months into the shooting, and saying, This is the only time you'll ever get a chance to do this scene. It's going to be up there for the rest of your life. Hoffman adds, He really meant it. It makes me cry, because he had that kind of passion, and it had that importance. I've never forgotten it. Mike worked like a surgeon every second.

Steven Spielberg calls *The Graduate* a visual watershed, and invokes the moment when Benjamin races home ahead of Mrs. Robinson to tell her daughter Elaine, whom he loves, about his affair with her mother. All of a sudden, the mother appears in the door behind Elaine, Elaine turns, and the focus racks to the mom. But when Elaine turns back the focus stays—Elaine is actually out of focus—and very slowly comes back until she is sharp and she realizes that Benjamin and her mother have been shuffling.



I had never seen long lenses used that way to illuminate a character moment.

In Spielberg's encyclopedic appreciation of Nichols's cinematic innovations, he lists the handheld camera in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which further complicated the anxiety and turned the couple's war into a dance; the brilliant use of light in *Day of the Dolphin*, when the aquarium lights are turned on and a dead body is discovered floating inside the tank; the way Nichols built, bit by bit, the paranoia and terror in *Silkwood*, which was, for Spielberg, one of the most frightening and suspenseful things I had ever seen in a movie; the long opening shot in *Carnal Knowledge*, at the college party, and the way he made love to Ann-Margret through the lighting. That controversial film, which Nichols considers his darkest, was a coruscating look at predatory sexual chauvinism and at women's suffering, themes that resonated with Nichols's own life at the time. He was not nice to his girls, says a close friend of those middle years, when Nichols was married to his third wife, the Anglo-Irish novelist Annabel Davis-Goff, who is the mother of two of his children, Max and Jenny. (He had split up with Margot Callas in 1964.) He was a terrible household tyrant.

Carnal Knowledge dramatized this tyranny. The night before Nichols was to shoot the crucial scene—the bedroom fracas between Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) and the depressed Bobbie (Ann-Margret), in which Jonathan goes berserk trying to force Bobbie out of his house and calls her a ball-busting, castrating, son-of-a-cunt bitch! Feiffer sat with Nichols as Nichols explained why the scene had to go. It's just so ugly, it's so awful, people are gonna hate it, and they're gonna hate the movie, Feiffer remembers him saying. We went for a bite, Feiffer adds. I just sat in the car listening to him go over and over why he couldn't shoot it. Finally, he just looked at me and said, No, we've got to do it, because it's true.

But after the box-office failures of both *Carnal Knowledge* and the ambitious but misguided *Catch-22*—a story whose surreality was not Nichols's strong suit—Nichols began, by his own admission, to lose his way. Once, during this period, he sat idling in his Rolls-

Royce at a Beverly Hills traffic light when a pimp in a flashy car pulled up beside him. That's a Silver Cloud, the pimp said. And you, man, are the silver lining. And so it had seemed, until, after his third miscue, with *Bogart Slept Here*, it wasn't. Nichols told the world that he'd lost his appetite for making movies, but what he'd lost was a vital sense of connection to what he was doing and what he wanted to say. Usually it happens right away, when I'm reading a script I see a moment, and I know what that moment is, and it's my hook into the whole thing, Nichols says. In the years between closing down

Bogart Slept Here, in 1975, and starting *Silkwood*, in 1983, those moments of compelling inspiration eluded him. In the interim, besides developing a film version of *A Chorus Line* (which he subsequently abandoned), he produced the musical *Annie* and the one-woman Broadway show that launched Whoopi Goldberg's career.

Then, sometime in the middle of the eighties, visions of an altogether different kind appeared to Nichols: for about six months, he experienced a Halcion-induced psychotic breakdown. He became delusional—he was convinced, for example, that he had lost all his money, and that he'd turned from being the hero of the story into the villain. Because I'd lost the money, I was the bad guy. I'd brought shame and unhappiness to my family, he says. It was a horrible feeling of abject despair and self-loathing. He was wide-eyed and gaunt. Nothing seemed to help. He called Buck Henry to ask if he'd give him enough sleeping pills to end his life if it was absolutely necessary. Of course, I said I would, Henry says. I was lying. At one low point, Nichols sat with the producer John Calley, now the head of Sony Pictures, and tallied up his assets item by item on a foolscap pad. Calley says, I'd add the numbers up and at the bottom it would have thirteen million six, and I'd say, Do you see thirteen six? He'd say, Yes. I'd say, Now, can you accept that? He'd say, The only thing I could accept would be you telling me that when I go into debtors' prison you will take care of the children. (Max was then eleven and Jenny was nine.) By the time Halcion was identified as the chemical source of his problem and Nichols



stopped taking it, he had learned, he says, what people are like when you're not so shiny and you don't have your powers. (His marriage to Davis-Goff broke up shortly thereafter.)

His collapse proved cautionary, and his subsequent movies, from Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues* and *Working Girl* to *Primary Colors* and *The Birdcage*, were an aggressive reassertion of his commercial shine. With the exception of *Primary Colors*, a subtle dissection of power and marriage, the films are crowd-pleasing fables. Nichols's impulse was clearly to build himself as solidly as possible into the Hollywood system. Every development executive, every studio president, has a list of directors, Spielberg says, and Mike has never been off the

A-list. This puts Nichols's survival at the top of the Hollywood tree at thirty-four years and counting—longer than such legends as Preston Sturges, Billy Wilder, John Huston, and Frank Capra. Spielberg adds, You want him because you know that he's going to tell the story better than it was told in the screenplay you bought. You're going to be getting basically two scripts for the price of one. Nichols knows the value of stories like *The Remains of the Day*, *All the Pretty Horses*, and *The Reader*; they are works he has produced, or will produce, but wasn't interested in directing. He loved the intellectual showboating of Stoppard's *Arcadia*, a play about chaos theory, and wanted to make it into a film, but he couldn't make the numbers work.

You don't want to take advantage of your friends and say, 'Would you mind doing this at a quarter of your price?' he says.

If movies hadn't changed so radically, what Mike would have been, perhaps should have been, Jules Feiffer says, is the successor to a director like George Cukor—working in romantic comedy with urbane wit and style. But those times passed. So he had to shuffle around to find something to replace that. In choosing his projects, Nichols needs to feel, he says, that only I can do this. When he picked *What Planet Are You From?*, he thought, Yes, this is for me. I know what to do with it. Nichols's next film, starring Robin Williams and with a script by Elaine May, will be a remake of the classic Ealing comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. I can only follow my excitement, Nichols says. Sometimes I wish it were more high-minded, and sometimes I'm glad that it's not. I have no choice either way. I don't think *The Graduate* and *Carnal Knowledge* were any different from what I'm doing now. But the fact remains that the early pictures said new things in an ironic, challenging way, and the later work ruffles no feathers.

In any case, Nichols's asking price for mainstream movies has gone up: he now gets about seven and a half million dollars just for taking on a film, plus approximately twelve per cent of the gross.

So it's hard for him to say no, John Calley says. Some of his friends wish he would. He knows I don't like a lot of the stuff he does. I think it's beneath him, Buck Henry says. He should be doing more *Hurlyburlys*. But Nichols, who has heard the arguments, is unmoved. All movies are pure process, he says. A commercial movie isn't less process than an art movie. You can't make your decisions about a film on the basis of Is it important enough? Is it serious enough? It's either alive or it's not for me. If it's alive, I want to do it. He adds, If you're funny, and you stay funny, I think that's already doing pretty good.

In the pale-gray calm of his midtown editing suite, Nichols sits behind his editor, Richie Marks, who works away at an Avid console, tweaking the finale of *What Planet Are You From?* on a triptych of screens. Bening and Shandling—the earthling and the recon-

structed alien—stand facing each other to reaffirm their marital vows. Bening is saying, Harold, meeting you has taught me the universe is one big screwed-up place where everyone's just trying to work out their problems, but I'm honored to work them out with you, because . . . I think . . . I love you. When the lights come on, Nichols says, I have this experience over and over. I make a movie because it draws me, and when I get it all finished I think, Christ, it's about me. The alien, who comes to earth merely to exploit women, has been humanized by love—and he becomes, as Nichols points out, simultaneously the leader of his planet. In Nichols's eyes, his marriage to Diane Sawyer has wrought the same miracle. True love made Pinocchio a real boy, Nichols said in a TV interview. We all sort of feel like we're contraptions, like we pasted ourselves together—a little bit from here, a little bit from there—and then, if you're very lucky, along comes someone who loves you the right way, and then you're real.

Mike spent many years without happiness. I mean, there were dark years where it wasn't quite working in relationships, Calley says. He was in them but they weren't giving him a lot of joy. With Diane, he doesn't have to pretend not to be who he is to make a partner comfortable. Intimacy requires equality; and Sawyer, who has her own constituency, checkbook, and clout, is in every way an equal to Nichols, whom she first met while waiting to board a Concorde flight from Paris. Even today, if asked to shut her eyes and picture him, Sawyer sees Nichols as she did that first day: All that light in his eyes and some sort of invitation. He's just full of invitation. It's like, Let's be young together. Let's see things for the first time and tell each other the absolute truth, want to?

After their chance meeting, Sawyer approached Nichols for a TV interview: I just had this idea of wild intelligence and that there'd be some surprise there, she says. The surprise was, she says, that there was no end to the surprises.

Nichols and Sawyer live on the seventh floor of a handsome Fifth Avenue apartment building with a view of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from their library. Most of Nichols's art collection was sold off at bargain-basement prices in his Halcyon panic; at one point he

owned six paintings by Balthus, including the infamous *The Guitar Lesson*, which hung over his bed. (I had to get rid of it, he says. It pissed off too many women.) But there is still a Stubbs, a Fischl, and a beautiful Morandi study of bottles whose hard-won peace echoes the current mood of its owner. He is on record as saying that the best definition of happiness appears in Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*. Happiness is equilibrium, the main character says. Shift your weight. It's good, and it's true, Nichols continues Stoppard's thought.

You have to stay light on your feet and remember what's important and what's not. These days, Nichols teaches; he attends meetings of Friends In Deed, an outreach charity for people with AIDS and other life-threatening diseases, which he founded with the actress Cynthia O'Neal; and he keeps up a proliferating E-mail correspondence. He visits his horses, and he even cooks now: his specialties include lemon pasta, risotto with smoked mozzarella, and sour-cream-peach ice cream. Sawyer leaves notes on the floor beside their bed when she slips off to the network every day at 4 A.M. to anchor *Good Morning America*; before going back to sleep, according to Sawyer, Nichols opens one eye and says, Tell it like it is.

On the chaise longue in the bedroom is an embroidered pillow with words that play on a line from one of Nichols's favorite movies, *Lawrence of Arabia*, in which an Arab tells Lawrence to abandon a straggler in his party. It is written, the Arab says. The cushion gives Lawrence's answer: *Nothing Is Written*. It seems an apt motto for Nichols's journey. Nichols, who keeps no diaries and few mementos of his extraordinary life, is still all future. He can go on and on until he chooses not to go on anymore, Spielberg says of Nichols's moviemaking career. But the greatest of Nichols's *mise en scènes* is himself: he has created a person who lives well in the world.

At the end of our time together, he sat back on the sofa and declared himself pleased with the conversation. I do well with the fundamentally inconsolable, I said. The words seemed to surprise Nichols and to press him back in his seat. His eyes uttered shut for a moment, then opened. We get a lot done, you know, he said. ♦