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"SEX, LIES & THE (PREMATURE?) DEATH

OF AGENT LITERATURE

BY ROSS JOHNSON

[There] were some who wondered, in all seriousness, whether he might have his eye on the Presidency.

- journalist Connie Bruck pondering the White House aspirations of former agent Michael Ovitz, The New Yorker, September 9, 1991

"Jeff takes me to lunch and says, 'I like to fuck on the first date. How about we triple your salary?'

- agent Bill Block misquoting agent Jeff Berg, Vanity Fair, January, 1993

"I'm the one dressed in black who walks out of the woods and into the diner and then beats the shit out of the guys pouring flour on people's heads."

- former agent Gavin Polone, Buzz, March, 1995

"My body fat is down to 12 1/2 per cent."

-agent Arnold Rifkin, GQ, October, 1995

Remember when the preceding tripe was passed off as heavy insight, rather than the unintentional waggery of commission salesmen working in conjunction with their favorite mouthpieces? Who cannot forget the cocktail of envy, admiration, revulsion and utter greed that enveloped the beleaguered denizens of Los Angeles as they perused the musings, scorekeeping, and wacky self-analyses of the clan known as Hollywood agents?

Thank god Tom Cruise put a stop to all this. Our Tom should be venerated for having the compassion to make his current sports-agent-with-a-heart-of-gold film "Jerry Maguire." Cruise, a man who seems to have an erupting predilection for humanitarian gestures, has truly stepped into the ranks of Mother Teresa with "Maguire."

By steering the attention of info-shocked magazine and newspaper editors towards the questionable phenomenon of the Cool Sports Agent Story - see "Leigh Steinberg: I Am Jerry Maguire!'" coming soon to a news rack near you - Cruise may have finally driven a stake through a genre that polluted more minds in the late twentieth century than "The Bridges of Madison County." Yes, it may very well be time for us to tip our berets to the passing of THE POWERFUL HOLLYWOOD MOVIE AGENT STORY.

"That story is dead," confirms GQ executive editor David Granger. "Now we've got asshole publicists pitching us asshole sports agent stories, but it's just not the same."

The irony of Granger's observation is that he obliquely confirms what Los Angelenos have known all along: all the printed tripe about

asshole Hollywood agents was manufactured by asshole publicists working in conjunction with the Fourth Estate. Wake up, guys! L.A. may be the world capital of bullshit, but it's bullshit we manufacture, and the locals know this: If Ovitz had run for President when he was the darling of the press, not only would have Ross Perot whupped his ass, so would have Lyndon Laruche.

But I'm not here to kick Number Two Mike when he's down (plenty of others have beaten me to him). No, I come with a higher mission. Until now, not one of the splintered, supplicating cogs in the agent p.r. machine, from Gotham magazine editors noshing at the Royalton in Manhattan to sweaty free-lancers pounding the swanker streets of L.A., have offered the citizenry that suffered most from the mindlessness of the oeuvre du agere litteratura an old fashioned, "We're sorry."

This is it, L.A. The big mea culpa. A story about Hollywood agents with nary a 100-carat puff quote from Jeff Katzenberg or Herbie Allen ("I saw a man I could do business with, and a friend who shared my vision"), not one overwrought claim to just-folks mendacity ("I went to high school in the Valley!"), or - this is my favorite - a tribute to Szun Szu/Billy Jack/Pat Riley, the spiritual warlord who guides the agent through the darkest valley of the shadow of the deal.

My mission was this: After making my share of change off yours truly was ordered to march up and down Wilshire Boulevard and get some sort of admission of guilt from all these Hollywood agents that have hogged way too much ink for all these years.

At least, that was the initial plan.

"Steven Gaines is a moron," snaps International Creative Management chairman Jeff Berg as he lasers his 1,000 yard stare in my direction. I'm sitting in Berg's mammoth white on black office, a place so well-ordered and immaculate that it's almost an affront to a disheveled journalist. As a warmup to the part where I was supposed to ask Berg to get down on his knees and shout forgiveness for all the p.r. that agents of his ilk have manufactured, I asked Berg, 48, what he thought of a Buzz magazine article, written by the afore-mentioned Gaines, that portrayed Berg as an "absentee monarch" who is "bored" with his own business.

"Gaines is a jerk," Berg adds in an effort to further elucidate his audience. "He wrote this junk about me and never even called me to see if it was true. It's not like I'm a hard guy to get on the phone." (Gaines counters that Berg refused repeated interview requests.)

Jim Wiatt, 47, Berg's co-ceo and longtime partner, harumphs knowingly. Wiatt was an aide for six years to Senator John Tunney back in the '70s, and has spent more time around reporters than most of the scribes who cover ICM. He knows that in the agency business, as in politics, perception often becomes reality.

Okay, Berg has a reason to be pissed off at the press. No Executive in Hollywood took more shots than Berg did due to the media's fascination with CAA when Ovitz was there. Despite repping stars from Arnold Schwarzeneggar to Michelle Pheiffer, despite raking in

close to $200 million dollars in commissions annually and being a huge force in the movie, tv, music, publishing and legit theatre business, ICM and its chairman always played the also-ran to CAA and Ovitz in the press. If Ovitz was a visionary, Berg was short-sighted. If CAA was organized with Japanese-like efficiency, ICM was chaotic. If Ovitz was an ingratiating genius, "Ice" Berg was aloof, cold, distant.

So how did Berg, the man who pulled off the richest owner-operator deal in Hollywood history for George "Star Wars" Lucas back in 1974 when Ovitz was still booking TV game shows, feel in the last decade every time he picked up a paper and read how brilliant Ovitz was?

"We never ran our business based on what Mike Ovitz was doing," says Berg with very strong emphasis. "For about ten years Mike decided to live in the press. I wasn't interested in doing that."

Of course, the argument can be made that Berg would have gotten more ink if his company had been as successful as Ovitz's. Why I didn't make that point goes to the heart of why agents got such great press over the years.

Most of the magazine journalists who wrote puff profiles of agents make between $3,000 and $10,000 for each assignment, with the majority clustered towards the lower end figure. If the scribe was a freelancer, the writing fee was only paid after the piece was accepted and a couple of months worth of blood had been shed.

On the other hand, agents in Hollywood constantly book staff jobs for journeymen sitcom writers who pull in $200,000 minimum a season - often for doing little more than sitting around a table and laughing at an executive producer's jokes. And in a world where Hollywood agents help make writers like Shane Black multi-millionaires, is it any wonder that a magazine journalist practically applauded any time one of these writers' agents so much as broke wind?

Berg, because the press needed a corollary to Ovitz's supposed genius, was the exception to the rule of print puffery. I asked his opinion of the media frenzy devoted to Ovitz's departure from CAA to Disney in the summer of 1995, a departure that was preceded by that of
Ovitz's longtime co-hort, Ron Meyer, who moved to the top executive job at MCA-Universal that Ovitz originally coveted.

"Don't you get it?" Berg shoots back. "You guys were lied to. You had painted this picture of a man who had all this control. But, in the end, he lost control of his own business and had to leave. You guys missed it."

And what did the press miss?

"Ron Meyer did to Mike Ovitz what Ovitz was trying to do to Meyer," responds Berg.

The stuff that Berg then runs down is pretty much old hat by now: Ovitz was in big trouble after the May, 1995, negotiations for him to run MCA-Universal had fallen apart; his long-time partner Meyer was infuriated that Ovitz had let Newsweek and other publications in on Ovitz's

planned move; Meyer, not Ovitz, was the heart and soul of the old CAA, etc., etc.

Meanwhile, I've got some clips sitting on my lap that paint ICM in an incredibly favorable light. One of the clips, a Kevin Sessums profile of ICM agent Ed Limato that was written for Vanity Fair, defined the role of entertainment journalist as blow job artist. When Berg pauses to catch his breath, I see a chance to dive into the real reason I'm here, which is to get Berg to apologize for his brethren and their manipulation of the Fourth Estate.

But I hesitate. I had not planned for Berg's intensity. Right, wrong, or whatever, the dude stakes out a patch of turf and defends it like a pit bull on methadrine. When I comment that I'm here to write a fun little piece, I chuckle. Berg just glares back at me.

To Jeff Berg, what's written about him is no laughing matter. His clients read this stuff, and they like it when their agent gets good press. It's called business, baby.

I decide right then and there that maybe I'd have better luck getting some other agent to get down on his knees and ask for forgiveness.

"The relationship between the press and CAA, specifically the press and Mike Ovitz, was very symbiotic," says agent Bob Bookman as he settles back on a couch stacked with manuscripts in his CAA office. "Mike gave the press access, he took them behind the scenes, and the press loved him for it. And they showed their love."

Bookman, 49, notes that he was the one CAA agent whom Ovitz allowed to be quoted by the press while Ovitz was shepherding the CAA p.r. machine. It's easy to see why Ovitz, who could be quite the dictator, gave Bookman space. Bookman, unlike many of the CAA faithful, was a success before he came to the agency. He never needed Ovitz to make money or give him status in the film business.

Now Bookman is on another of his well-reported rolls after scoring multi-million dollar movie deals for his clients Michael Crichton, William Goldman, and Scott Turow. Bookman is living about as large as an agent can in Hollywood, and he merely laughs when I ask him why, if Ovitz supposedly hated to do press, he so often posed for photographers and continually granted what thankful reporters grandly labeled "rare" interviews. (Ovitz declined to be interviewed for this piece.)

"Let's just say that when Mike finally left [CAA], there was a mass realization among the press as to what had gone on," says Bookman. Bookman then contends that the press is presently exacting their revenge and trying to tear down CAA. "There's nothing more unforgiving than a journalist who thinks he's been lied to. Only Mike didn't really lie to the press, he just agented them."

No one interviewed for this article faults Ovitz for agenting the press. If agenting the press made CAA more money, Ovitz was merely doing his thing. (In Hollywood, "to agent" refers to gettting someone to do your bidding without them being aware of the process.) And all agree that the attention that Ovitz received in

the late '80s was warranted. The business press, they say, was merely doing its job in initially reporting CAA's rocket-like ascension since its founding in 1975.

According to Phil Gersh, the 83-year-old founder of the Gersh Agency, things got skewed in the early '90s when East Coast publications like the New York Times, the New Yorker and Vanity Fair wanted to cover only one agent: Ovitz.

"It's the New York Yankees Syndrome," barks Gersh in a still-vibrant growl. "Everybody in New York wants to be with the front-runner, and they decided that CAA was the Yankees and Ovitz was (Yankee owner George) Steinbrenner."

Gersh claims that CAA was never adverse to poaching Gersh clients by reminding them of the coverage CAA and its clients got in the New York press. Notes Gersh, "CAA would say, 'Read this, we're the Yankees.' They gave [my clients] all that bullshit, and, sometimes, the client was vulnerable and listened to the bullshit."

But Gersh is also quick to add that all agents benefitted from the attention the press paid to Ovitz. "Partly thanks to Ovitz and all his press, being an agent today is a great job. It sure beats working at a studio and paying Jim Carrey $20 million for the opportunity to kiss his ass."

Of course, CAA didn't get to be CAA without kissing its own share of movie star butt. That's what Ron Meyer taught his charges to do, and it was CAA's ability to coddle young guns like Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt and ageless wonders Robert Redford and Al

Pacino that's made CAA rich. (CAA's TV arm has actually always been the big bread winner at the shop. Overhead-intensive movie stars and their often discounted commissions are merely the window dressing that brings the rest of the entertainment business into the tent.)

No agent at CAA disagrees with Bookman's claim that, obsequious reporting aside, it was Meyer, not Ovitz, who was the manipulating force among the agents at CAA. And neither will anyone counter Bookman's assertation that the relationship between Ovitz and Meyer is presently "less than zero."

The fact is that everyone at CAA today is too busy living in the present to sweat over what the press writes about Ovitz and Meyer. "They taught us how to make a lot of money," says a prominent CAA agent. "They're gone, and we're still number one. That's the story. The rest is just bullshit." And having witnessed the current backlash against Ovitz - even Ken Auletta of the New Yorker has turned in his Ovitz-autographed knee pads - no one at CAA seems to want to take Ovitz's place in the bed he made with the Fourth Estate. "The job of an agent is to promote his clients," says a tight-lipped Richard Lovett, the new CAA president, as he shows me to the door.

I never got the chance to ask Lovett the question I asked Bookman: "Weren't you guys ever embarrassed by all the puff that was written about your company?"

And how did Bookman respond? "Why fix something that works? Speaking

of which, how's your buddy Gavin Polone doing?"

In the last 18 months, whenever somebody in the entertainment or publishing business wanted to see me squirm, all they had to do was inquire about Polone, my "buddy." Polone is a former agent in the television business whom I profiled in a Buzz magazine article entitled, "The Infuriating Confidence of Gavin Polone." In the business of figurative fellatio, my Polone story ultimately became regarded as some sort of landmark. In fact, that's just the message from Polone's elated publicist that my chagrined wife retrieved from our answering machine when the story was published: "Incredible blow job, Ross. Let's do it again soon."

I never really intended Polone's profile to be a hummer. Like many an event in Hollywood, it just turned out that way.

When I was first introduced to Polone, he was a 30-year-old rising star at the United Talent Agency. Tall, thin, and bearded, he was being sold by UTA's p.r. people as an agent who spoke the truth and nothing but the truth; plus, he drove a Ferrari and was a black-belt in tae kwan do. Sort of a macho, Jewish Abe Lincoln with cash. Despite having an iddy-biddy misgiving about Polone's client list - he primarily repped TV writers, a no-no in the movie-crazy world of agent literature - I hopped on board the Polone train immediately.

The work was not exactly heavy lifting. I just turned on my tape recorder and started transcribing Polone's own interpretation

of the Polone fable: Homely, lonely kid from the wrong side of the tracks of Beverly Hills becomes rich and famous by standing up to evil studio bosses who want to abuse his client list of cool writers. Along the way, he has to overcome evil adversaries at CAA and ICM, who - according to Polone - are just in it for the money and secretly want to screw the all the truly talented people of Hollywood.

And the capper to the tale? Polone was so busy working for his clients, he remained - despite the Ferrari and the $1 million annual salary - just a lonesome lad who could not find the right girl who would appreciate the real Gavin Polone.

Hey, it wasn't the Lou Gehrig Story, but it was good enough for me. All I had to do was plug in a few puff quotes from Katzenberg and the usual crowd, and I was done. Paid my piddly fee. See ya.

Until my Polone piece hit the newsracks, I never realized how so-called powerful men could get so out-of-whack after reading a favorable piece about an agent other than themselves. While Polone was being bombarded with calls from prospective clients and fielding offers from beautiful babes who wanted to ease his pain, I was catching a huge load of crap. "How could you let that asshole Polone use you the way he did?!" was one of the nicer criticisms. It came from a publicist at the William Morris Agency, who told me he was merely relaying the comments of WMA agents - agents who, by

the way, were available for interviews.

I was in a quandary: Should I agree with the accusation that I was a naive toady, or should I cop to the truth - and thus risk being labeled a lying journalist?

Here's the facts: Polone is a salesman, one possessed of enough self-awareness to realize that agent literature, like the genre of detective fiction, is based on selling an utter falsehood. The lie being that agents, like private dicks, do something so intrinsically interesting that they in turn are interesting. Sitting in a stuffy office all day kissing up to men and women more powerful than you while simultaneously pissing all over some of the planet's most desperate people might make a man or woman rich. But it doesn't make Gavin Polone or Jeff Berg inherently more engaging to a magazine reader than an inner-city school teacher or a Kurdish refugee or a great skateboarder.

So Polone bent the truth into myth, something to make his story a better read. I didn't believe all of it, but I also did not question it. I printed the myth as he told it and got paid by editors happy for some hot copy. To those who called me a toady, I merely grinned stupidly and went on about my business. Until I started this article, I never wrote about another agent.

And Polone? He was fired last April from UTA for allegedly using his managerial position to harass a subordinate. Four days after his dismissal, UTA issued a Polone a public apology absolving him of any wrongdoing and reportedly paid out his remaining

contract to a tune of $5 million. He now has a much lower profile as a personal manager.

But he's still getting ink. Polone recently entered the field of journalism by writing an article on Hollywood masseuses for the September, 1996, issue of GQ. It was a pretty good piece, actually, which did not surprise me in the least.

I called him to compliment him on his work, and then asked if he ever regretted any of the considerable press he did when he was an agent.

"An agent is in the marketing business, so all press is basically good press - except the shit you wrote about my money and my car," responds Polone, who believes that portraying an agent driving a Ferrari is quite the cliche.

"Food is a function of need rather than desire, therefore I don't have any specific needs," said the agent Arnold Rifkin in the April issue of W. And Rifkin's opinion of sleep? "I don't rely on sleep, though I'm aware of its necessities." Vacations? Rifkin, 48, claimed that he had never had one, until he went to Africa last Christmas to meet Masai warriors with - you guessed it - Jeff Katzenberg.

It's a shame that the demise of agent literature is being played out on the back pages of a women's fashion magazine. With better timing, Rifkin could have been one of the greats.

Currently the head of the motion picture department at the

William Morris Agency, Rifkin is a former Frye boot salesman who represents Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stallone, Whoopi Goldberg, et. al. And he is a journalist's dream.

Rifkin looks and dresses like a model (which he once was). He's quite vocal about his belief in the techniques of motivational guru Tony Robbins. That's right, a big Hollywood guy who swears by a walking infomercial. And Rifkin, an agent who sells on the phone all day, claims he had to labor for 12 years to overcome a speech impediment. Lou Gehrig lives!

Here's the bonus plan: Rifkin is not afraid to talk on the record. He does not ask for quote approval or for a reporter to submit a list of questions in advance. He does not rely on flacks to run interference for him during interviews. "He'll say anything. He doesn't care," says Anita Busch, a film reporter for Variety.

It was Busch who broke the story of Sony Corp.'s recent approach to Rifkin to run the motion picture division of the company. The offer fell through and Rifkin subsequently got a fat contract to stay at Morris for another five years. So now it's official: Rifkin has crossed the threshold of being perceived as a mere agent. Forever more, he'll be mentioned in the press whenever a studio plays musical chairs. He's a big-time comer.

But I can feel the hair on the back of my neck rise to attention as I sit across from him in his Morris office. Rifkin makes no attempt to be charming. He reminds me that my coffee could stain his desk by delicately sliding a napkin under the cup. The

smoke from his Havana cigar rises to form a blue, heavy cloud above us. I sense the smoke is like Rifkin: It'll probably keep expanding to fill whatever room it's given.

I scan my list of questions, then decide to open the interview with, "What's this I hear about you being the biggest raper and pillager of them all before the Morris p.r. department started selling you as an eminence grise?"

This was my last stop on my agent trail. None of Rifkin's brethren seemed the least bit contrite about using desperate journalists to not write the truth; i.e., if a bomb fell out of the L.A. smog and blew an agency to kingdom come, the clients would merely shuffle down the street to the competition and do their deals there. Maybe I wanted Rifkin, a notorious poacher of other agents' clients, to throw me out of his office.

Rifkin takes a long pull on his Havana, then replies, "What's an eminence grise?"

I hesitate. Shit, this guy has a college education? (He does - University of Cincinnatti.) Then I hear myself giving a definition that sounds suspiciously like, "I know a grise when I see one." .

"A raper and a pillager?" Rifkin whispers. "When I started out in 1974, nobody showed me how to be an agent. I had no mentor. No writers knocked on my door and gave me scripts. No actors begged me to represent them. I support a wife and two children. If I'm a raper and pillager, whom have I hurt? I think I made a lot of people a lot of money."

Rifkin grimaces when he states the above. Then he meticulously runs down his WMA division's list of accomplishments since he took over in 1992.

I cut him off. "How come agents are always going on and on in the press about what great friends they are with their clients, when the truth is they're usually not?"

"Look around you," replies Rifkin. "Do you see any pictures of my clients?

I examine Rifkin's office, which is small enough to fit in the side wing of Jeff Berg's digs. The only pictures on display are of Rifkin's family.

"All I want from my clients is their respect," says Rifkin. "They don't have to be my friend."

Then Rifkin sighs. He stares at me with a look that combines equal doses of pity and disgust. "A raper and a pillager?" he posits once again. The Arnold Rifkin interview is over.

For the next hour, I listen to a series of questions from Rifkin. Now it is the journalist who feels under attack. Rifkin questions my own views on what a man should sacrifice for his family. He questions the ethics of journalism. Interspersed with this are ruminations on what can only be called the World According to Arnold.

A little voice inside my head goes, "You're being sold something." It's all there. The infamous ferocity of Rifkin. The references to Tony Robbins and Pat Riley, Rifkin's other good buddy

and the Mister-In-Your-Face of pro basketball coaches. Rifkin's commitment to his William Morris subordinates in the face of adversity. The Great William Morris Comeback - which is not form, declares Rifkin, it's substance, podner.

And then it happens. I break. It begins as I wonder why I have to be the one tearing the clothes off guys like Rifkin now that their media stock has dropped. Maybe I got it all wrong. Maybe agent literature is on the verge of a tremendous resurrection. Maybe Tina Brown and Graydon Carter and the rest of S.I. Newhouse's culture mafia are lurking outside right now waiting to crown Rifkin The Next Cool Guy.(Hey, he had the guts to tell his former client Joe Eszterhas that Joe's writing needed improvement.) What if I'm destined to go down in history as the Lord Jim of agent literature, the wretch who jumped off the floundering boat a tad too soon?

Then I remember the words of the comedian Albert Brooks. "These agents start doing press, and pretty soon they're so busy talking to the press that they can't take your calls," says Brooks. "Then the agents get so big that when bookings come in, they take the bookings. But, hey, that's America."

As Rifkin explains some chart that lists the six keys to success for the agents who work for him, it hits me. If Rifkin wants to hire some of the best press agents in the business to flack for him, who cares? He may not be curing cancer, but he's not ripping off subway funds or trying to shove liquor and cigarettes down our throats. He's just an agent. And if I get tired reading

shit about Bruce Willis or Sylvester Stallone, why can't I read shit about the man behind the stars? When I get sick of reading bland p.r. about Bill Clinton, I should be able to read funky stuff about Dick Morris. It's America, right?! And if I want to read this stuff, then somebody's gotta write it. Who cares if the writer does it while on his knees?

Now Rifkin is silent. He's pointing towards his chart.

"Respect. Equality. Sharing. Unity. Loyalty. Trust," I read aloud as Rifkin's impeccably-manicured hand moves down the chart.

Before I leave, I note that Rifkin has not tried to control the interview by hopping on and off the record or hiding behind the skirts of his publicists. I thank him heartily.

"You're quite welcome," Rifkin replies as he lights up another Havana and, with a look of contentment, leans back in his chair.

End