

in an above ground society

by Tom Baker

Prior to June of 1967, I had never met Andy Warhol. In fact, I had seen only one of his films, "Chelsea Girls," and my reaction to it was mixed. In all, I hardly considered myself fodder for his Super Star mill. But a series of events led to my meeting him and the opportunity to work with him. The film, "I, A Man" was to become quite a success, not only financially, as do most his films, but critically as well, which was a great surprise to a large number of people.

I had been living and working in Los Angeles for some six months, doing very conventional television shows, each one equally uninspired. A phone call from New York informed me of the near fatal accident of a close friend. I made quick arrangements to leave that night, and during the course of a very hectic day, I ran into Nico, of "Chelsea Girls" fame. When I told her I was leaving for New York, she gave me two phone numbers, one D. A. Pennebaker's, the other Warhol's. I had no intention of calling anyone while in New York, I simply wanted to visit my friend and return to L.A. However, four hours after my arrival, having had a few drinks in a Greenwich Village bar to brace myself, I headed up Seventh Ave. in the direction of Bellevue Hospital. Just outside of the restaurant, I was stopped by a short, elderly man who spoke English with a strong Italian accent. He was asking me if I would be interested in working in a film. My mood was hardly agreeable under the circumstances, and I would have laughed in his face had I not been so upset. I just ignored him and started to walk away, but he was persistent and stopped me again. I tried to tell him I had no time for that old line. Having lived in New York for five years, I was a little familiar with people stopping me on the street and asking if I would like to be an actor. Again he asked me and this time added "please, please, come inside, meet the director." A combination of his sincerity and my not wanting to stand in the middle of the sidewalk and explain myself to him made me go back in the bar, where I was introduced to Italy's Carlo Lizzani. He was preparing to direct a film in Manhattan, but he had been unable to find the right face for the leading role and his start date was just four days away. I took his card and agreed to call him at his hotel that evening. We met for dinner and he described his project. It was interesting enough for me to make arrangements to stay an extra two weeks. My first few days in town I had been staying at Norman Mailer's house in Brooklyn Heights. Mailer himself was finishing work on his first film, "Wild 90," and would leave the next day for Cape Cod.

Sitting around the huge empty brownstone, I began thumbing through my telephone book, looking for an interesting number to call, when the piece of paper Nico had given me fell out. For the hell of it, I decided to call Warhol. He answered the phone himself and invited me to stop by his factory that evening, at that time still located on East 47th St. Around 8:00 that night, having no idea what to expect, I climbed the five flights of stairs, ignoring the huge freight elevator which looked too complicated to try and operate. It was a gray dingy building, like many in New York, with faded lettering on each door telling of the various shipping and receiving companies renting space there. As I approached the door to the factory, rock music could be heard, along with a few live voices shouting back and forth. The door was open and I walked in and waited for someone to notice me. The room was just about as I had heard it to be, draped with peeling silver foil and the walls

and the ceiling, unfinished silk screen paintings lying about. I spotted Warhol standing with a few people, and he came over to me and we shook hands and introduced ourselves. He was soft spoken, very polite and he seemed quite nice in all. He didn't exactly come right out and ask me to work with him, but began by telling me that they don't pay their actors. I had told him on the phone that I was a professional actor. Also, it seems he had seen a film I made two years earlier, when it was shown at the Cannes Festival that spring. I assured him I was not interested in money, only in him and his work. So, in less than five minutes it was set, I would do a film with him. We made an appointment to meet later that night at a local rock club, "The Scene." I went early to see a friend from California who was singing there. It was after 12:30 when Warhol and a large group of people arrived and joined me at my table. I introduced them to my friend, Jim Morrison of The Doors, and we settled back to watch the show, with a minimum of conversation being exchanged. Afterwards, Morrison and his group held a semi-private party in the club as it was their closing night. I had been drinking rather heavily most of the day, so by the time Warhol and I got around to discussing the film, I was a bit under the influence. Warhol outlined a simple enough premise, one man, myself, and a number of girls. The film would be a series of vignettes between myself and the individual girls. What was finally settled on was a mixture of "Alfie" and "I, A Woman." The whole time we were talking about the project, Morrison, who by this time was no more sober than myself, would loudly interrupt and claim that he was the one Warhol should be using instead of me. I would turn to him and just as loudly tell him to stick to his music and leave the acting to me. Warhol stood motionless, taking it all in; the calm in the eye of the hurricane.

It was ten days before I finished work on the film with Carlo Lizzani, and a day afterwards, a Friday, filming began on "I, A Man."

We gathered early in the evening, Warhol, Paul Morrissey, Gerry Malanga, Ingrid Superstar, Ivy Nicholson, myself and a strange girl named Valarie Solanis. The set was an artist's apartment on East 10th St. and Ave. A. Also there were Billy Name, Warhol's still man, Bettina Coffin, and three or four other unidentifiable people. What proceeded to unfold was as unusual an experience as I have had, before or since.

It is interesting to note that the first scene to be shot, and in my opinion the best, was the long, 35 minute take with Bettina Coffin, in which we discussed her life and loves and her husband's reluctance to kill cockroaches. When seeing the completed film, this scene was placed at the end of the picture. We finished shooting late the next night in a penthouse on Riverside Drive. Six hours later I was on a plane, returning to L.A.

About a month afterwards, I picked up a copy of the New York Times and discovered an ad for "I, A Man" with my name and picture staring out. Two days later, Warhol, Morrissey, Ondine, Ultra Violet, Nico and others poured into my Hollywood flat and asked me if I would do two or three additional scenes, with Ultra and Nico and someone else... this in spite of the fact the picture had long been opened in NYC, and had been reviewed by all the dailies and Time Magazine. Andy intended to insert the new scenes into the film, which had been running some 2 or 3 weeks, and he did just that, about one month later.

Warhol's disdain for the conventional was demonstrated to me when I went to the Hudson Theatre in N.Y. to see the film and discovered he and Morrissey had not only inserted the three new scenes after the film had been running for over a month, but they simply ran two different prints, one after the other. For example, if you paid

your three dollars at 8:00 PM you saw the six girl version. If you happened to be in the 10:00 PM crowd you saw the film with nine girls. The night I was there, two old ladies who had come in in the middle of version #6 stayed to see what they had missed. Naturally they were confused and upset when two entirely different girls came on.

I like Warhol, and I like his arrogance. He is indeed a most unusual man. The first time I sensed violence or impending danger was during the scene with Ivy Nicholson. She had stipulated that she would not appear on camera with me in the nude. Shortly after the scene began, for lack of something to do, I walked out of frame, quite obviously going behind the camera, and removed the towel I was wearing in order to put on my pants. Ivy, clad only in unlaundered bikini underwear, exploded in an emotional fury and stormed out of the room in tears, claiming all the while she had been betrayed. It was only after much cajoling on everyone's part, and many apologies from myself that she returned to complete the scene. During the time she was out of the room, about five minutes, I was standing talking with Warhol, who was very much perplexed by Ivy's behavior, since, as he casually pointed out to me, "Ivy'll cut her wrists for me, but she'll always go out of frame or out of the room when she does these things." Ivy's was the second scene we shot after Bettina's. The next one was with Valarie Solanis. I felt no personal threat from Valarie. Just the opposite, I found her intelligent, funny, almost charming, and very, very frightened. She talked to me about her organization, "Society for Cutting Up Men," (SCUM), saying she had a large number of followers. She did say that there was a men's auxiliary, for those she considered safe or harmless. She told me a bit about her SCUM manifesto and offered me a copy, which I took and read later on. It was no great surprise to learn of her near successful attempt on Warhol's life less than one year later.

Some three months after finishing my work with Warhol, I had the opportunity to work with Norman Mailer on his second film, "Beyond The Law." The mood, setting and circumstances for making this picture were as different as the two men are themselves. Mailer and I had known each other for over a year, I had spent the entire summer of '66 in Provincetown with him working on his then unfinished play version of "The Deer Park." Our relationship is that of good friends and drinking companions. So I had an idea of what was in store when he called one Friday night and invited me to come down to the Leacock/Pennebaker Studios on W. 45th St. to work in his new film. And a good crowd was there. Mike McClure, and Rip Torn along with Jose Torres, Jack Richardson, George Plimpton and many, many others, all drinking, laughing and telling stories.

With Warhol, one is immediately aware of his presence, by his penetrating, enigmatic silence, his gentle yet powerful way of encouraging everything and anything. Mailer, on the other hand, is so electric, gregarious and intellectually and physically overpowering, it is impossible to remain neutral about him once you have met him. He greeted me warmly when I came in, as we hadn't seen each other in two months, handed me a good stiff drink of bourbon in a paper cup, and, since I was dressed in a shaggy lambs wool vest with Tom Jones shirt and my hair long, he suggested I play the role of a hippie who is busted while tripping out in his pad. I couldn't have cared less, I was just glad to be working with Norman once again. The two scenes went smoothly and were funny and real, with Plimpton cleverly satirizing Mayor Lindsay. Filming was going on all over the studio, in three different rooms, and Mailer would roam from room to room,

trailed by his entourage of "acting" lieutenants and any number of cameramen, usually D. A. Pennebaker himself, who, with his personally designed camera, would weave and snake all over, never interfering with the actors, getting good angles and fine results. The action never stopped and the scenes in the studio were shot in two nights. Chaos was the rule though, and this feeling invades and dominates the spirit of the film. Here too, as with Warhol, everything and anything is anticipated, only in a much more intellectual and existential sense.

The scene between Noel Parmentel, Torn, McClure and Mailer, for example, was as tense and physically dangerous as it was to appear on the screen. There were a number of bruised bodies the next day. And the episode depicting the plight of publisher Peter Rosoff, arrested on suspicion of soliciting in the men's room of a subway, crackles with the real and honest feelings of an unfairly victimized man whose dignity has been further trampled by the brutal interrogation of Parmentel and Mailer. He finally throws a cup of coffee into the unsuspecting Mailer's face. All this time, the inconspicuous camera of Pennebaker is whirling away. The only version I saw of the film was a 7 hour uncut screening of the rushes. I found them to be funny, real, exciting, boring, self-indulgent and awkward, just as I do with Warhol's uncut films. All in all, the best way to illustrate the differences between working with the two men, is to compare the feeling one would get going out drinking with Norman, Rip and company, against the opportunity of doing a love scene with Valarie Solanis, who, it turns out, should have been in "Beyond The Law" also. Although both men work under vaguely similar conditions, both have mutual audiences. While Warhol enjoys a far greater commercial following for an "underground" filmmaker, he and Mailer play heavily to college campuses.

With this same audience in mind, I began my own, and very first directorial project. The title is "Bongo Wolf's Revenge" and was shot in about nine days, beginning in early August, on through Labor Day, working mostly on weekends. We shot in 16mm b/w, Eclair and Nagra direct sound, using 4X and Plus X Negative film. My camera work was divided between three equally capable men. The first three days of shooting was done by Paul Ferrara, who did the camera work on "The Doors," "Feast Of Friends." He had to leave town shortly after we began so I enlisted the aid of Frank Lisciandro, normally an editor, who had worked with Ferrara on "Friends." Lisciandro did two days work and Lewis Teague, whose film "It's About This Here Carpenter" won a special prize at the N.Y. Festival a few years ago, completed the remaining work, which was also the bulk of it. The sound was done by Babe Hill, a co-worker of Lisciandro and Ferrara. I have over 8,000' of film to edit, and this work begins in the next few days. Working with me on this will be David Naftalin, a USC film school student. I expect a 60-65 minute finished film. The subject matter is no less bizarre than anything Warhol himself has attempted, and my meeting the person, Bongo Wolf himself, was just as unusual as my encounters with Lizzani, Andy or Mailer. One day last June, while visiting a girl at her house, the phone, ringing all day long, kept interfering with whatever she was doing. At one point I began answering it, telling people she was out. One call turned into an hour long conversation between myself and a strange, whining voiced individual. "Is Lucy there?" "No, she's not here, who's calling please?" "Wellllll, this is Bongo." "Who?" "Bongo. Bongo Wolf. I'm a friend of Lucy's from London." I cover the mouthpiece and tell her who it is. She tells me to talk to him, that he is funny and interesting. "When do you think she'll be back?" "I really don't know." "Wellllll, who is this anyway?" "This is her father." . . . pause

. . . "Her father? Oh, hi, how are you?" All this time Lucy is whispering in my ear, telling me to ask Bongo about the time in London he tried to drug her and a girl friend, in order to seduce one of them. "What's this I hear about you trying to seduce my daughter by drugging her?" "No, no, that's not right, I wasn't trying to seduce your daughter, I was trying to make her girl friend." "What's wrong with my daughter, she not good enough for you?"



Bongo Wolf



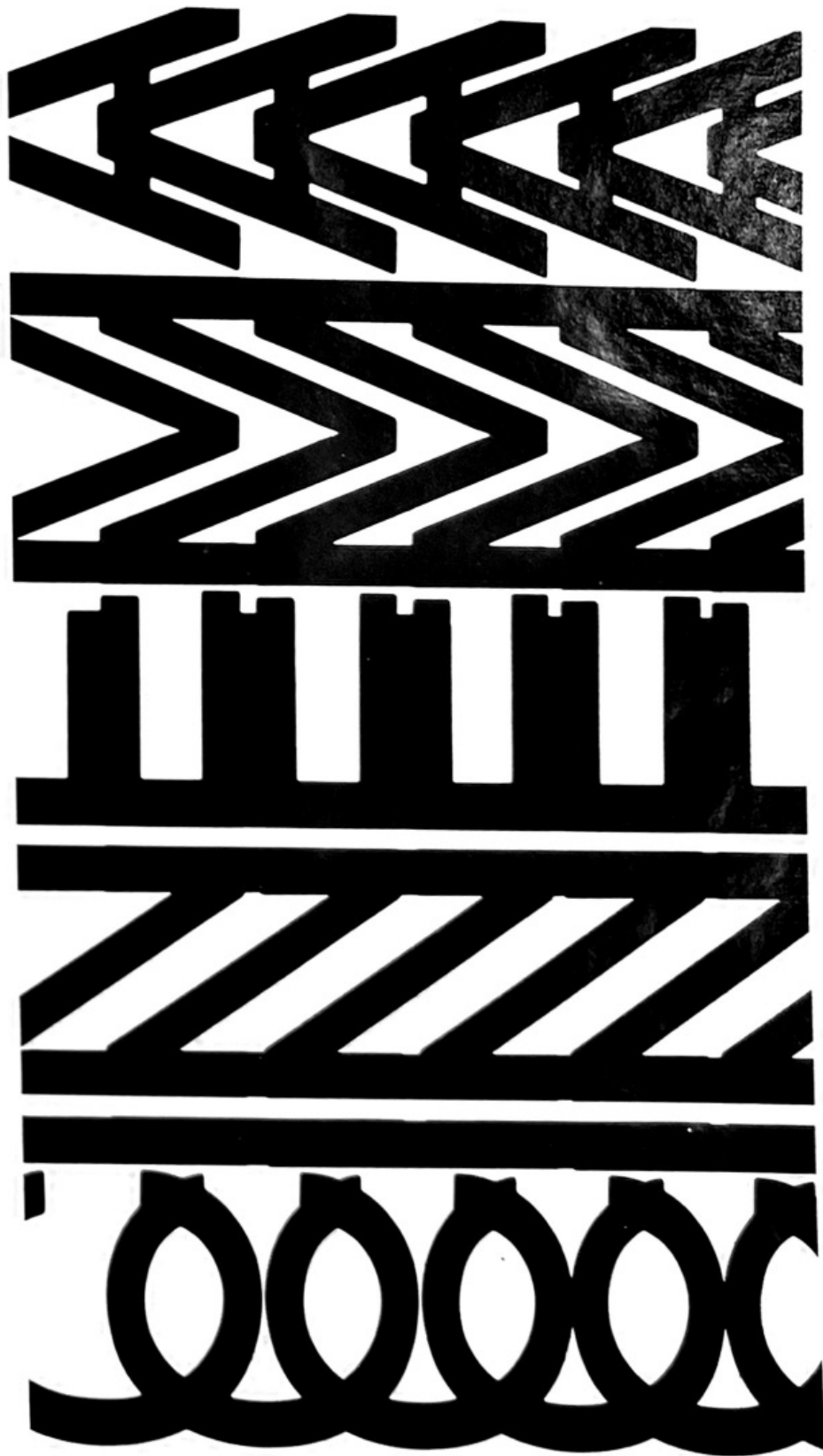
the Benedict Canyon home of a friend, actor/photographer Kaz Garas and his wife, along with some other people, most of them unknown to me. I started to eavesdrop on the person on my right, folksinger Jimmy Ford, who was telling his date about a friend of his. The character description was familiar, as though I knew or should have known who he was talking about. I interrupted him and asked, is the name of your friend Bongo Wolf? At this point I decided it was time to meet Bongo in the flesh, so I asked Ford if he knew where I could find him. He told me Bongo lived just down the hill in Beverly Hills proper and if I wanted, he would go and bring him up to meet me. I practically insisted he do so, for I was very anxious to finally meet this intriguing character whose path I had been crossing so frequently. It took about an hour for them to return with him, and all the while they were gone, I wondered just who

"No, no, you don't understand, I wanted to make it with her girl friend. Not Lucy."
 "Well, did you do it?" "Wellllll, no, not really. She had such a horrible body odor I had to clean her up first and it was too much trouble." And so the conversation went, all the time Bongo believing me to be the girl's father. Bongo went on to tell me of his special interest in the occult, his fascination with the supernatural, how he reads paperback editions, the latest, on witchcraft and satanism, how he is working on a novel about these things. After hanging up, his still thinking he had been talking to Lucy's father, I realized I had just come across a fairly peculiar person. Some weeks later, in the home of another girl, I saw hanging on her message board a small pencil drawing of a Neanderthal man with a huge erection. I asked who the artist was and was told it was drawn by none other than Bongo Wolf. Later that night I was in

little idea who he was, only that he had traveled with P. J. Proby, the singer, in Europe and Australia, and had been with him about two and a half years. He played his bongos when Proby made personal appearances and evidently made something of a name for himself in the London Pop circle. When he finally arrived at Garas's house, he could not have been more unlike anything I had imagined. Dressed in rumpled checked coat, white shirt and striped tie, with plain black shaggy pants, wearing thick glasses in plastic rims, this being his constant ensemble, he was carrying his most prized possession, a large black leather satchel, weighted down with his "goodies." I watched and listened to him for over two hours, as he talked endlessly of the occult and witchcraft, and he showed everyone his drawings, heads of monsters, vampires and ghouls, and one labeled "Old Nick Scratch." Bongo works only in pencil, on plain white typing paper, and he does mostly full head and profile sketches, since, as he puts it, he has a "mental block about drawing the rest of the body." I wasn't sure at first just what I thought of him.

I finally decided that he was simply a genuine person who could care less what you thought of his special interests. I remembered our first encounter on the phone and how he had hung up, still believing me to be the girl's father, not in a naïve sense, but only because I had told him I was and did not bother to correct the impression. At that moment, I realized this was the perfect person to make a film of, a sort of day in the life of Bongo Wolf, which was close to the original title. It was changed to "Bongo Wolf's Revenge" after I talked with him at length and he expressed his views on a number of things, particularly pornography. Bongo is disturbed that anyone could be against such a harmless thing as this, something a person enjoys for his own reasons in the privacy of his home without bothering anyone. One aspect about most pornographic material that does make him angry, since he is attracted to women's hairy armpits, Bongo does not like it when the makers of these books "keep penciling out the armpits." Four nights later, with much encouragement and financial assistance from Garas, filming began on "Bongo Wolf's Revenge." My locations covered as much of LA as possible, from adult bookstores on Hollywood Blvd., to all-night movie houses; friends' homes in Laurel and Benedict Canyons to the streets of Beverly Hills and LA, inside of city buses, the ballroom of the Hotel Monica in Venice, even the tri-monthly meeting of the LA chapter of the Count Dracula Society. For these are Bongo's haunts, whether he is flashing his homemade vampire's teeth at hippies in the park, (his father, with whom he lives, is a dentist) or spending part of his \$7.00 weekly allowance on a rare paperback meticulously selected from the racks of the Partridge Bookstore (his favorite). About half of the film is strictly documentary in style, the other half, my own point of view on Bongo and his world. The cast includes a pair of beautiful twin girls, called Gemini, another girl named Terry Teraba and Sugarbear, a delightful guy who stands about 4' 6" tall. Also, Bongo's best friend Damon, a card manipulator and practitioner of the Black Arts plus many others with special cameos by Severen Darden, Warren Finnerty and the ubiquitous Noel Parmentel.

One scene has Bongo digressing on Nero, another on Marcus Aurelius, yet another about the Hebrew Satan, Samael. All this amid various settings which suggest a suspension in time and a very strange bridge from Bongo's world to our own. How much of ourselves we finally detect in Bongo remains to be seen. I have a feeling he will strike a responsive chord in more than a few of us. But then, that's Bongo Wolf's revenge. ★



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