

TOM HANKS

THE MAKING OF
ANOTHER MAJOR
MOTION PICTURE
MASTERPIECE



A NOVEL

ALSO BY TOM HANKS

Uncommon Type

THE
MAKING OF ANOTHER
MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

MASTERPIECE

TOM HANKS

Comic Book Illustrations by R. Sikoryak

Alfred A. Knopf  NEW YORK TORONTO 2023

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF AND ALFRED A. KNOPF CANADA

Copyright © 2023 by Clavius Base, Inc.

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and in Canada by Alfred A. Knopf Canada, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.

www.aaknopf.com

www.penguinrandomhouse.ca

Knopf, Borzoi Books, and the colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC. Knopf Canada and colophon are trademarks of Penguin Random House Canada Limited.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hanks, Tom, author. | Sikoryak, R., illustrator.

Title: The making of another major motion picture masterpiece / Tom Hanks ; comic book illustrations by R. Sikoryak.

Description: First edition | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2023. | “This is a Borzoi book published by Alfred A. Knopf.”

Identifiers: LCCN 2022033251 | ISBN 9780525655596 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780525655602 (ebook) | ISBN 9781524712327 (open market)

Subjects: LCSH: Superhero films—Fiction. | Comic books, strips, etc.—Fiction. | Motion pictures—Production and direction—United States—Fiction. | United States—Civilization—1945—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3608.A71522 M35 2023 | DDC 813/.6 23/eng/20220—dc16
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022033251>

Library and Archives Canada Cataloging in Publication

Title: The making of another major motion picture masterpiece : a novel / Tom Hanks.

Names: Hanks, Tom, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20220260915 | Canadiana (ebook) 20220260923 | ISBN 9780735277014 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780735277021 (epub)

Classification: LCC PS3608.A71522 M35 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

Ebook ISBN 9780525655602

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover images © Shutterstock

Cover design by John Gall

Original cover concept by Ceara Elliot

ep_prh_6.1_143390430_c0_r0

*For all the actors in the cast
and every member of the crew*

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
.....
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook...

Horatio,
to the assembled

Let us haste to hear it
And call the noblest to the audience.

Fortinbras,
immediately afterward

—*HAMLET*, ACT 5, SCENE 2

CONTENTS

1 *Backstory*

2 *Source Material*

3 *Development Hell*

4 *Prep*

5 *Casting*

6 *The Shoot*

7 *Post*

A little over five years back, I had a message on my voice mail from one Al Mac-Teer—which I heard as *Almick Tear*—from a number in the 310 area code. This no-nonsense woman asked me to call her back regarding a thin little memoir I had written called *A Stairway Down to Heaven* about my years of tending bar in a small subterranean club that played live music way back in the '80s. At the time, I was also, sort of, a freelance journalist in and around Pittsburgh, PA. And I wrote movie reviews. These days I teach Creative Writing, Common Literature, and Film Studies at Mount Chisholm College of the Arts in the hills of Montana. Bozeman is a gorgeous if stark drive away. I get very few voice mails from Los Angeles, California.

“My boss read your memoir,” Ms. Mac-Teer told me. “He says you write like he thinks.”

“Your boss is brilliant,” I told her, then asked, “Who is your boss?” When she told me she worked for Bill Johnson, that I had reached her on her cell as she was driving from her home in Santa Monica to her office in the Capitol Records Building in Hollywood for a meeting with him, I hollered, “You work for *Bi-Bi-Bi-Bill JOHNSON*? The movie director? Prove it.”

Some days later, I was on the phone with Bi-Bi-Bi-Bill Johnson himself, and we were talking about his line of work, one of the subjects I teach. When I told him I'd seen his entire filmography, he accused me of blowing smoke. When I rattled off many salient points from his movies, he told me to shut up, enough already. At that time, he was “noodling” a screenplay about music in the transformative years of the '60s going into the '70s—when bands evolved from matching outfits and three-minute songs for AM radio to LP side-long jams and the Jimi Hendrix Experience. The stories from my book were full of very personal details. Even though my era was

twenty years after what he was “noodling”—our club booked unheralded jazz combos and Depeche Mode cover bands—the stuff that happens in live-music venues is timeless, universal. The fights, the drugs, the serious love, the fun sex, the fun love, the serious sex, the laughs and the screaming, the Who-Gets-In and Who-Gets-Bounced—the whole riotous scene of procedures both spoken and intuitive—were the human behaviors that he wanted to nail. He offered me money for my book—the nonexclusive rights to my story, meaning I could still sell the *exclusive* rights, if there should ever be an offer. Fat chance. Still, I made more money selling him the rights to my book than I did selling copies of the thing.

Bill went off to film *Pocket Rockets* but kept up with me through calls and many typewritten letters—missives of wandering topics, his Themes of the Moment. The Inevitability of War. Is jazz like math? Frozen yogurt flavors with what toppings? I wrote him back in fountain pen—typewriters? honestly!—because I can match anyone in idiosyncrasy.

I received a single-page letter from him that had only this typed on it:

What films do you hate—walk out of? Why?

Bill

I wrote him right back.

I don't hate any films. Movies are too hard to make to warrant hatred, even when they are turkeys. If a movie is not great, I just wait it out in my seat. It will be over soon enough. Walking out of a movie is a sin.

I'm guessing the US Postal Service needed two days to deliver my response, and a day was spent getting it to Bill's eyeballs, because three days later Al Mac-Teer called me. Her boss wanted me to “get down here, pronto” and watch him make a movie. The term break was coming up, I had never been to Atlanta, and a movie director was inviting me to see the making of a movie. I teach Film Studies but had never witnessed one being made. I flew to Salt Lake City for the connecting flight.

“You said something I have always thought,” Bill said to me when I arrived on the set of *Pocket Rockets*, somewhere in the endless suburb that is greater Atlanta. “Sure, some movies don’t work. Some fail in their intent. But anyone who says they *hated* a movie is treating a voluntarily shared human experience like a bad Red-Eye out of LAX. The departure is delayed for hours, there’s turbulence that scares even the flight attendants, the guy across from you vomits, they can’t serve any food and the booze runs out, you’re seated next to twin babies with the colic, and you land too late for your meeting in the city. You can hate *that*. But hating a movie misses the damn point. Would you say you hated the seventh birthday party of your girlfriend’s niece or a ball game that went eleven innings and ended 1–0? You hate cake and extra baseball for your money? Hate should be saved for fascism and steamed broccoli that’s gone cold. The worst anyone—especially we *who take Fountain*^[*1]—should ever say about someone else’s movie is *Well, it was not for me, but, actually, I found it quite good*. Damn a film with faint praise, but never, ever say you *hate* a movie. Anyone who uses the h-word around me is *done*. Gone. Of course, I wrote and directed *Albatross*. I may be a bit sensitive.”

I lingered on the set of *Pocket Rockets* for ten days and, over the summer, went to Hollywood for some of the film’s tedious Postproduction. Making movies is complicated, maddening, highly technical at times, ephemeral and gossamer at others, slow as molasses on a Wednesday but with a gun-to-the-head deadline on a Friday. Imagine a jet plane, the funds for which were held up by Congress, designed by poets, riveted together by musicians, supervised by executives fresh out of business school, to be piloted by wannabes with attention deficiencies. What are the chances that such an aeroplane is going to soar? There you have the making of a movie, at least as I saw it at the Skunk Works.

I was not on location for much of the making of *A Cellar Full of Sound*^[*2]—which is what later became of some of my little book. My loss. Bill had me paid another bit of coin when the movie began shooting, more when the film came out—the man is generous. I saw the first public showing at the Telluride Film Festival, where he referred to it as “our

movie.” In January, I rented a tuxedo and sat at a back table at what was then the Golden Globe Awards (at Merv Griffin’s Beverly Hilton Hotel, the very definition of a H’wood party). When my colleagues ask me about my weekend in Fantasyland, I tell them I didn’t get back to my hotel until five in the morning, very tipsy, dropped off by Al Mac-Teer and none other than Willa Sax—a.k.a. Cassandra Rampart—in her chauffeur-driven Cadillac Escalade. There was no other way I could sum up the experience in terms they’d understand. Willa *Sex*? No way! I’d prove it by showing them the Facebook photo she posted—there I am, with Al Mac-Teer, laughing our heads off with one of the most beautiful women in the world and her moody bodyguard.

COVID-19 had been dividing up our country into its Mask/No Mask politics and turned my job into online classes. Then came the Vaccine/Anti-Vax dialectic. When Al Mac-Teer called me with an invitation to join her, Bill, and his merry band to observe the *full duration* of his next film, I thought shooting a movie was neither legal nor possible. But her boss “had a thing” that looked like it was going to be “green-lit” and shot under “Guild protocols” and I was invited to “join the Unit” from the start of Cash Flow to the Final Dub.

“You’ll have an ID badge,” she explained. “You’ll be one of the crew and be tested twice a week. We won’t pay you anything, but you’ll eat for free, and the gratis hotel room will be nice enough.” Al added, vividly, “You’d be a very big dope to say no.”

I asked Bill Johnson himself why he would allow an interloper like me to observe what is often treated as something akin to a top-secret project, one with badges and flashing red lights and signs warning THIS IS A CLOSED SET. NO VISITORS WITHOUT APPROVAL OF UNIT PRODUCTION MANAGER.

Bill laughed. “That’s just to intimidate the civilians.”

One night on location, after another long, hard, yet average day of shooting, over YouGo FroYo, Bill told me, “Journalists—the lazy ones anyway—always try to *explain* how movies are made, as though there’s a secret formula that we’ve patented, or procedures that are listed like a flight plan for a voyage to the moon and back. *How did you come up with the girl*

in the brown polka-dot dress who could whistle so loud? When did you first imagine that last, indelible image of those blackbirds on the TV aerial, and where did you find trained blackbirds? Why, they ask, did this film succeed when this other film went flat? Why did you make Bonkers A-Go-Go instead of Moochie Spills the Beans? That's when I look at my watch and say, 'Hot damn! I'm late for that marketing meeting' and bolt the interview. Those people look at the Northern Lights as having been designed. If they saw how we movie-orphans do our job, they'd be bored silly and very disappointed."

I never got bored. Disappointment? While hanging around for the making of a motion picture? *A fig!* [*3]

There is always a good conversation to be had on a movie set, around the Production Office, and during the Postproduction process because most of moviemaking is spent *waiting*. The question *How'd you get started in this racket?* prompts hours of very personal, improbable stories, each saga worth a book of its own.

When I said this to Al, the subject came up about writing a book to explain the making of movies through my time on the movie. I was going to bear witness to so much of the creativity, friction, surface tension, and balls-out fun on the project, what if I were to write about it all and, well, publish a book? Would her boss be enraged by that idea? Chuck me off the set?

"Oh, Cowboy," she said. "Why do you think you are here?"

I hope to have taken myself out of the narrative; to write about the making of a movie like *Knightshade: The Lathe of Firefall* from a first-person perspective would be self-serving, like covering the Battle of Okinawa as though it was about the reporter ("I was worried that sand, stained with the blood of dead Marines, would get into my typewriter..."). Much is owed to all who talked with me over the many months they worked while I watched. They shared not just what they do but who they are. If their names appear—there are some whose don't—it means they have seen what I have written and either approved of these pages or okayed the changes I made at their request. I went back to many of them again and

again to clarify what I thought I had seen, what they had told me of their own journeys along Fountain Avenue.^[*4]

Movies last forever. So do characters in books. Blending the two in this volume may be a fool's errand, wasted effort in the mining of fool's gold. Don't hate the final product. Think of it as *quite good*.

Joe Shaw
MCCA
Mount Chisholm, Montana

[SKIP NOTES](#)

^{*1} “Fountain” refers to Hollywood’s Fountain Avenue. Bette Davis was once asked her advice for actors wanting to make it in Hollywood. She said, “Take Fountain”—meaning as opposed to Sunset or Santa Monica Boulevard or Franklin Avenue.

^{*2} A wicked, surprise hit of the pre-COVID days. Good worldwide numbers—despite no audience in China. Those nominations and the AMPAS nods were a salve to the ego. Not a single win, but still...

^{*3} Shakespeare’s *Othello*, act 1, scene 3. Iago to Roderigo.

^{*4} Two groups on the Unit asked to *not ever* be mentioned in this book: The stand-ins for the actors who hope to be actors themselves and not be pigeon-holed as stand-ins. And the personal assistants, those who tend to the upper echelon of the key players. Their anonymity was sacrosanct, for if their names and job descriptions were made public, their lives would be made a living hell. Let me say, though, I saw how hard and long they all work, and the ton of nonsense they so expertly deal with. They are loved.

The following is based on a true story.
Characters and events have been altered for dramatic purposes.

ANOTHER FRANCHISE

“What would be wrong with another franchise?” asked Fred Schiller—a.k.a. the Instigator—of the Fred Schiller Agency. He had once again flown into Albuquerque for a dinner with his distinguished client Bill Johnson. As usual, they were at Los Poblanos—one of Albuquerque’s better restaurants.

It was July of 2017, and Bill was about to head into the shooting of *A Cellar Full of Sound*, for which he had also written the screenplay. As was their tradition, the client and agent met to talk about what would come after the present picture was done; the deep look into their future that kept a career going with forward momentum. There was no talk of the movie about to be made, just the options for future enterprises.

“Franchises are killers,” Bill said, speaking from well-known experience. The pressures to have *Horizon of Eden* match the quality and popular success of *Border of Eden* and then *Darkness of Eden*—all “written and directed by”—had been like holding on to political office. By the final day of shooting on *Horizon*, Bill had lost twenty-five pounds, stopped shaving to save time in the mornings, drank three shots of ZzzQuil every night to sleep, and had survived the last two weeks of Principal Photography running on the fumes of triple espressos. Bill Johnson, who once typed out this one sentence on his 1939 Smith-Corona Sterling—MAKING FILMS IS MORE FUN THAN FUN—had had none whatsoever completing that last chapter of *Eden*, which took nearly two years of his life.

In his three-decade run of films, Bill was firmly—to the envy of many—in the win column, save a couple of so-so performers and the one unmitigated disaster.^[*1] Bill now developed his own material, turning down big works that would have replenished his coffers, and with his 10 percent made the Instigator happier, too. *A Cellar Full of Sound* had been a relative pleasure to write, a pain in the ass to prep, and could go any way in the shoot.

But since *Pocket Rockets* had brought Bill back from the disaster that had been *Albatross*, the Instigator saw that the filmmaker was at the top of his game, and he wanted that to remain the case.

“Franchises become cruel masters. I don’t want to work for a cruel master,” Bill said. “I don’t like *being* the cruel master, except in meetings with marketing.”

“Audiences have so many options for entertainment,” Fred said over grass-fed veal medallions and garden sunchokes. “They need a reason to exchange their money for a ticket to a movie. Bill Johnson is a reason. A superhero franchise is coin of the realm, like westerns were in the ’50s and ’60s and action movies in the ’80s. The Comic-Con fans go to see *everything*.”

“If only to hate it. Just ask Lazlo Shiviski.”^[*2] Bill leaned back. “I like the antiheroes, the flawed and haunted ones.”

“Marvel would give you the next Thor.”

“Tell them I’m Thorry, but no.”

“D.C. would give you anything on their slate.”

“The Batman, the X-Men, Spider-Boy, Green Giant, Lady Kick-Your-Ass... You don’t see a glut?”

“Dynamo will back up a truckload of cash and drop it on your driveway if you said yes to one of their Ultra movies.”

“Superheroes saving the galaxy and kitty cats stuck in trees. Ho-hum.” Bill finished his Blue Sky cola in the tall glass of ice, no straw. “I’m not against the genre, just the tropes in them. Evil lords from other galaxies who speak English. Super guys and girls that want to kiss but never do. Whole cities being destroyed, but we never see the corpses.” Bill waved to the waiter and pointed to his glass for another Blue Sky. “And Pat is on me to do a boy-meets-girl movie.^[*3] A movie for *her*.”

“What’s wrong with that idea?”

“A girl-meets-boy story depends on two things. The girl, the boy, and why they need each other. Three things.”

“The world is waiting for another Bill Johnson motion picture,” the Instigator said.

“It will be called *A Cellar Full of Sound* and should be in a theater near them in twelve months, give or take.”

“The future is not next year. It’s three years from now.”

“I’ll ponder.” That had always been Bill’s process. He’d land on some source material by accident, which would spark an idea, which he would then turn into another major motion picture masterpiece.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[*1](#) *Albatross*—aptly named.

[*2](#) Lazlo Shiviski was excoriated by the fanboys for his *Quadrant: The Seeker*, which was the fourth in the *Quadrant* saga. Bill thought the movie was grave and special, but something pissed off those fans, and they beat the living daylights out of Shiviski and the film. Lazlo had been in the trophy run season for awards with *Luna and Sweet*, the same year Bill was for *Barren Land*, but they both lost every time to Lisa Pauline Tate, who was *due* for her fabulous *The Getaround*.

[*3](#) Dr. Patrice Johnson, Bill’s love.