

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Capote]

Breakfast on Death Row

By Steve Sailer

PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN, the pallid, pudgy, and titanic character actor best known for playing rock critic Lester Bangs in “Almost Famous,” confirms his stature as the American Alec Guinness in “Capote,” a biopic recounting the six years Truman Capote devoted to his pathbreaking 1966 “nonfiction novel” *In Cold Blood*, the progenitor of the true-crime genre.

I’d always pictured Hoffman as a bear of a man—he’s long been the fan favorite to play the mountainous Ignatius J. Reilly in the great New Orleans comic novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*, which has languished in Hollywood’s Development Hell for a quarter of a century—but in “Capote” he almost disappears into a very different son of the Crescent City, the tiny, epicene café-society raconteur with the childish and effeminate voice.

“Capote,” which opens Sept. 30 in New York and Los Angeles, exists mostly to showcase Hoffman’s performance. To give you time to absorb the actor’s every nuance, the pace is kept sluggish. Still, “Capote” is rewarding, even though the film’s criticism of the author is tendentious.

By 1959, Capote had written a popular novella, “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” and

had charmed his way into the Jet Set. Yet he was unsatisfied.

Capote is strikingly prefigured in the character Ambrose Silk in Evelyn Waugh’s underrated 1942 novel *Put Out More Flags*. Silk is one of Waugh’s most sympathetic creations, a flamingly effete novelist whose default career path would have “led gently downhill to the world of fashionable photographers [and] stage sets,” an unkind reference to what Waugh viewed as the squandering of the talents of Cecil Beaton, whom he lampooned as David Lennox in *Decline and Fall*.

Indeed, in the 1950s, while designing the sets and costumes for the Broadway debut of “My Fair Lady,” Beaton mentored Capote in snobbish frivolity. Yet just as Waugh’s Silk had “turned aside from the primrose path; had deliberately chosen the austere and the heroic,” Capote set aside his metropolitan amusements for a half decade to pursue an original form of literary art. He had decided that the future of literature lay in nonfiction, that journalism could be raised above quotidian hackwork, and that he was the man to do it, even if he had to cultivate strengths none of his friends suspected he had.

So when Capote read of the murder of a respected family of four in a remote Kansas hamlet, he audaciously proposed to *The New Yorker* that he cover the case in depth. It’s hard to imagine a less congenial subject or setting for Capote. When he first arrived, he had a hard time persuading the rural locals to talk to him. But this silly-seeming man with the adamant ambition ultimately won their affection and co-operation.

“Capote” centers around the writer’s humid relationship with the two convicted killers during the half decade they

repeatedly appealed their death sentences to the U.S. Supreme Court. During his prison visits, Capote became infatuated with one of the murderers, Perry Miller, who reminded him of himself: sensitive, artistic, prissy, and ravenous for admiration. (In a sinister example of life imitating art, Miller was played in the 1967 movie version of “In Cold Blood” by actor Robert Blake, who was recently acquitted in his wife’s murder.)

Capote helped the pair get a good lawyer to craft their first appeal. But after he’d completed most of his manuscript and realized how strong it was, his need for a dramatic ending (such as, say, their hangings) made him increasingly impatient with their endless appeals.

Screenwriter Dan Futterman attacks Capote for being a heartless monster who manipulated poor Miller into telling him his secrets even though Capote eventually hoped for his execution.

In reality, of course, the true monsters were the murderers, who had decided days before their home invasion to shoot the whole family to eliminate all witnesses. With his conventional liberal bias against capital punishment, Futterman doesn’t realize that without the death penalty, repeat offenders, who face long prison terms if caught again, would more often find it logical to kill their robbery victims to keep their identities secret.

The stress of writing *In Cold Blood* led Capote to drink, which, combined with his subsequent celebrity, set off his sad decline. Still, he had helped launch the New Journalism of Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, the most fertile innovation in American literature since World War II. ■

Rated R for some violent images and brief strong language.

BOOKS

[*The Worlds of Herman Kahn: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War*, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, Harvard University Press, 432 pages]

Clown Prince of Nuclear War

By James P. Pinkerton

AFTER HIROSHIMA, the conclusion of American strategists was that military history didn't matter much anymore. The atomic bomb seemed to have changed war so drastically that now, more than ever, fighting was too important to be left to generals.

Out of that new belief came Robert McNamara's "Whiz Kids," the systems-analyzing technocrats who gave us the Vietnam War. Decades later, that same generalized feeling—that in the face of the new, history was bunk and anything was possible—gave rise to George W. Bush's neoconservatives, the WMD-mongering apparatchiks who launched the Iraq War.

But before the prominence of either of these groups there was Herman Kahn, the subject of this new book by Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi. As she makes clear, Kahn's radical way of thinking blazed a dubious trail for others to follow—for all those practitioners of the abstracted and deracinated theorizing that guided and misguided the U.S. into Vietnam and Iraq.

A household name in the '60s, Kahn authored two best-selling books, *On Thermonuclear War* and *Thinking About the Unthinkable*. And for all the heaviness of his subject matter—and himself, too, weighing nearly 300 pounds—Kahn was intellectually nimble, even glib; one critic was charmed by his "curiously chatty ... digressing ... jazzy style."

Yet for most of his career, the big man was the subject of merciless criticism

and satire. While the character of Dr. Strangelove owes little to him—that wheelchair-bound atom-maniac, in his Teutonic tics, owes more to Henry Kissinger or Wernher Von Braun—the strategist's idea of a "doomsday machine" was at the black-humor heart of Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie.

But when it came to bleak comedy, Kahn was in on the joke. In discussing mutations that might come from nuclear war, he asked, "It is possible, isn't it, that parents will learn to love two-headed children twice as much?" As the *Village Voice* observed, "He would make such a great stand-up comic. Who else can make people laugh about mass annihilation?"

Such was Kahn's genius that people across the political spectrum found much to admire in his work, which mostly explored how America might fight, win, and survive a nuclear war. Militarists and right-wingers of the Curtis LeMay/Buck Turgidson school were on board with any idea that aided and comforted their vision of a triumphant first strike. And yet Kahn's concentration on civil defense appealed to many liberals, too; Hubert Humphrey so admired *On Thermonuclear War* that he entered an abridged version of it into the Congressional Record, declaring it "an honor" to do so, since the work "embodies the intellectual honesty and rigor so much needed in discussing the problems of our survival." From further over on the Left, the veteran socialist Norman Thomas added his own backhanded praise: "Kahn deserves ... attention from those of us who believe that universal disarmament down to a police level under a strengthened UN is our sole valid hope of a decent existence."

For decades after 1945, Americans were bewitched, even bamboozled, by the "brave nuclear world" argument. The glare of atomic fire cast sharp shadows across the old landscape; the old military virtues of bravery and strategy on the conventional battlefield seemed like mere black holes of nostalgia and sentimentality. Upon learning of Hiroshima, the young military analyst Bernard Brodie cried out, "Everything that I have

written is obsolete"—although in fact, Brodie was just at the beginning of a long career as a strategic thinker, producing books with titles such as *Escalation and the Nuclear Option*.

"Escalation," in fact, was a usage popularized by Kahn, who became a master of nuclear newspeak. As Ghamari-Tabrizi notes, the advent of atomic weapons brought about a shift as to who could speak with authority on the subject of warfare. She writes, "When officers objected that Kahn was ill-equipped to speak on military affairs, he'd shoot back, 'How many thermonuclear wars have *you* fought recently?'" Indeed, Kahn dripped with disdain for the old-thinking military: he would call senior officers "stupid" to their faces, even as he offered them the chance to prove that they were smart—by signing on to his new worldview.

In the words of a visiting British Member of Parliament, "One of the strangest features of American life in the 1950s—which no doubt will continue throughout the 1960s—is that many of the experts who lead the discussion on the nature of war have no experience in it or training for it." Or, as Kahn—who served an uneventful noncombatant hitch in the U.S. Army during World War II—liked to say, "In this field, everybody is a theorist." So if there were few flights of fancy among the men who had stormed the beaches of Anzio or Tarawa earlier in their careers, Kahn stood ready to fill the void; he sported the right egghead credentials, and yet his great strength was as a horror-story teller, using nuclear grotesquerie instead of ghosts and goblins. Ghamari-Tabrizi rightly connects him to such savants of the horrifically surreal as Hieronymus Bosch and William Gaines, the publisher of the grisly EC Comics line.

Born into a left-wing family in Bayonne, New Jersey in 1922, young Kahn moved west after his parents' divorce, earning a B.S. in physics from UCLA and doing graduate work at Cal Tech. But his lefty associations—he joined Americans for Democratic Action and the American Civil Liberties Union and attended