



As a campus crowd watches (above), the Paramount crew sets up a key scene in which Pookie Adams (Liza Minnelli) and Jerry Payne (Wendell Burton) chat in a tree — a sprawling Camperdown Elm that stood behind Minor Theater until it had to be removed in the early 1970s. (Payne's off-white pants can be seen amid the branches.) For moviegoers familiar with upstate winters, the scene was a seasonal blooper: It supposedly took place in midwinter despite the lush greenery.

Liza Minnelli (left) prepares for a scene with the battered Volkswagen driven by Pookie Adams outside the Alpha Delta Phi house (now Eells House), used in exterior shots as Jerry Payne's residence hall. Watching are director Alan J. Pakula and Tim McIntire, who played Jerry's roommate, Schumacher.

# When Hollywood Came to the Hill

40 years ago, an unlikely film titled *The Sterile Cuckoo* gave the College a star turn

BY DONALD CHALLENGER AND ALLISON ECK '12



**Sandy Faison K'72 (with guitar) was a newcomer to the Hill when she landed the role of Nancy Putnam, college roommate of Liza Minnelli's character Pookie Adams. Chris Bugbee '69 (far left) and Mark Fish '70 (second left) also had credited roles.**

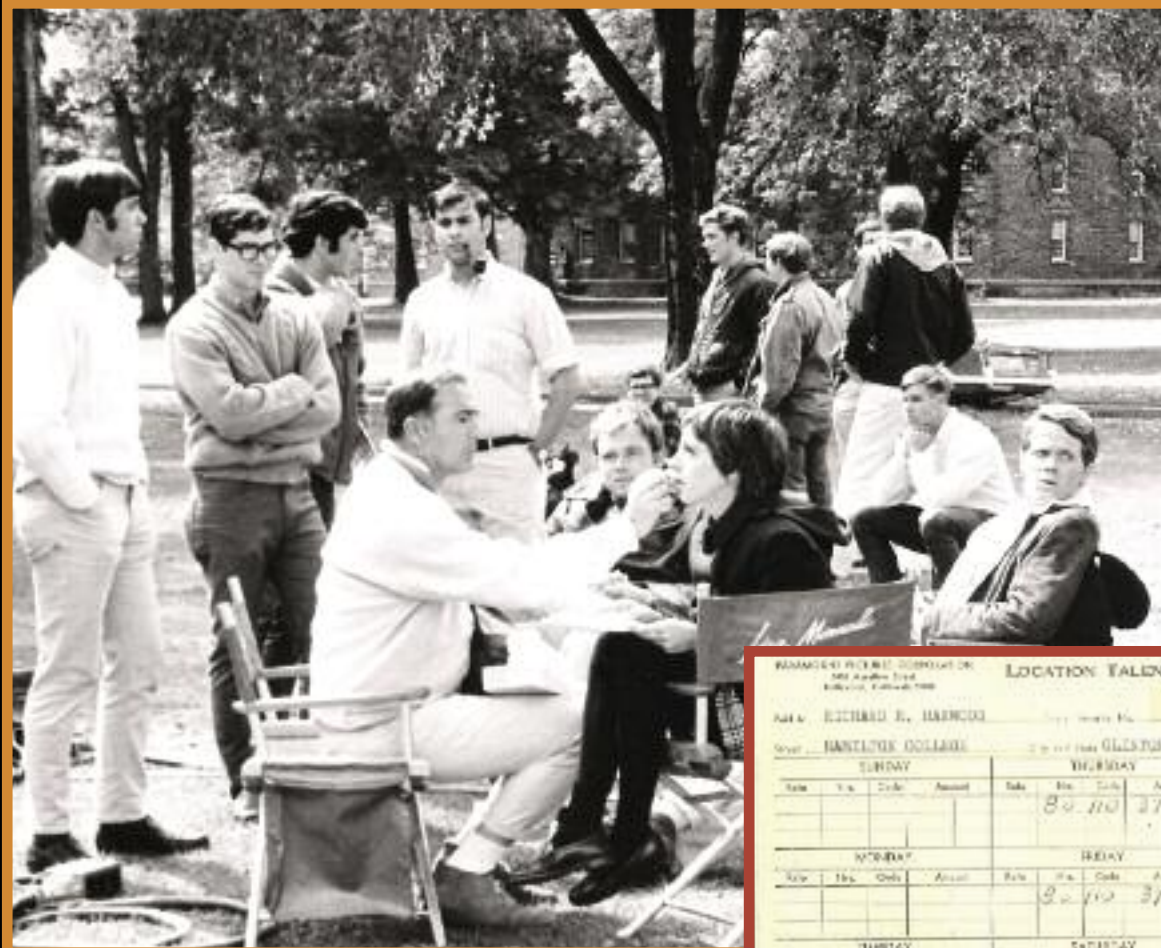
■ *For about 15 seconds in *The Sterile Cuckoo*, I'm just to the right of Liza Minnelli in a party dance scene. The scene took three days to film, so I saw a lot of how the movie business works, or did then. Minnelli displayed terrific energy and charisma, time after time, take after take. But co-star Wendell Burton was a wash. The other rookie in this combination, director Alan Pakula, showed the perfectionism that would take him, like Minnelli, a long way in movies. In contrast, Burton and I faded quickly, but a night job as a copy editor at the *Utica* newspapers took me in another direction. Hurrah for liberal arts. — Alexander Cruden '68*

■ *In the fall of 1968 I had dreams about Kirkland and Hollywood. None of them came true. Like most of my Hamilton memories, it is hard to distinguish the real from the imagined. I am pretty sure about a few things: Alan Pakula did not want my top-siders to appear in the drunken stairway scene, but I refused to change to Weejuns. Jeff Miller was instructed to fake his guitar strumming in same scene so he would not qualify for musician's wages. I gave Liza Minnelli Frisbee lessons but was never paid. Oddly, "Come Saturday Morning" is a tune that I often find myself humming on cold autumn mornings. — Fred Endemann '71*

**IF** THIS STORY WERE A NETFLIX SYNOPSIS, it might go something like this: "First-time film director buys rights to book by rookie novelist, then hires untested actors for not one but both lead roles. Resulting movie about college life and love is filmed and released at height of 1960s culture wars, but still manages to run 107 minutes without a single passing reference to Vietnam, civil rights, protests, drugs or tie-dyed fashion."

The climax to such a story arc would seem pre-ordained: fade to black, with neither the movie nor those involved ever heard from again. As Richard Nixon once claimed to have said, though, "But that would be wrong." In fact, *The Sterile Cuckoo* — based on the novel by John Nichols '62, filmed on the Hamilton campus in 1968 and released in October 1969 — had a groovy little run, both critically and commercially. It launched the film career of Liza Minnelli, who was nominated for an Oscar and a Golden Globe for her portrayal of Pookie Adams. It marked the directing debut of Alan J. Pakula, who would go on to direct an impressive string of hits over two decades, including (speaking of Nixon) *All the President's Men* as well as *Kluge*, *The Parallax View*, *Sophie's Choice*, *Presumed Innocent* and *The Pelican Brief*. It provided an early boost to what has become Nichols' storied career as novelist, essayist, environmentalist and political activist. It grossed just under \$14 million in the United States, according to the Internet Movie Database — more than respectable in an era when a movie ticket was typically less than a buck and a half. (The year's blockbuster, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, did \$102 million.) *Cuckoo* even drew raves at the time for what eventually came to be regarded as the film's weakest element, its music: a second Oscar bid for Best Original Song, the cloying "Come Saturday Morning," and a Grammy win for the score based on the song.

And, of course, for dozens of Hamilton and Kirkland students hired as extras, as well as for the Hill itself, it offered a heady flash of cinematic exposure at the same historic moment that Andy Warhol was coining a prophecy which seemed absurd at the time, but which has since proven to be as reliable as a well-maintained VW Bug: "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes."



Stars Liza Minnelli and Wendell Burton (far right) get a touch-up during the fall 1968 filming of *The Sterile Cuckoo* on campus. "I believe members of the Class of 1969 can spot several familiar faces," says Rob Harwood '69. "The photograph appears to have been taken just about in front of the AD [Alpha Delta Phi] house, where, on occasion, Minnelli joined in what I remember as a nearly perpetual game of Frisbee."

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NAME: RICHARD E. HARWOOD										ADDRESS: GLENSIDE, N.Y. 11545				DATE: OCT. 5, 1968			
JOB: HAMILTON COLLEGE										CITY: JAMAICA, N.Y.				STATE: N.Y.			
DATE: SUNDAY										DATE: THURSDAY				DATE: OCT. 5, 1968			
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For many Hamilton and Kirkland alums, the houseparty scene shot on the back porch of the Theta Delta Chi house (now the Woolcott House) provided the most memorable moments of filming — as well as a chance to appear on camera. In this shot a stressed-out Pookie Adams (Liza Minnelli) tries to escape the crush of bodies.



Rob Harwood '69 has saved his pay voucher from his work on *The Sterile Cuckoo*. His band, the King James Version, appears in the houseparty scene, although the music was later overdubbed by studio musicians.

■ We saw *The Sterile Cuckoo* as graduate students at Penn and were enthralled both by the story and by the idyllic campus setting (totally unaware of its identity). Little did we know that decades later, three of our four children, Kathleen '88, Dennis, Jr. '93 and Will '06, would become captivated in person by the beauty of the "College on the Hill" and eventually all graduate from Hamilton! How could we have guessed, furthermore, that Kathy and Dennis would marry schoolmates Jon Hale '87 and Marshall Trow '93? Will's marital status remains undecided, but who knows, perhaps still another Hamilton alumna will someday join our clan. Understandably, *The Sterile Cuckoo* and its campus "sitting" remain a special part of the Lynch family lore. — Ann Marie and Dennis Lynch P'88, 'P93, 'P06

■ Thanks to Bob Hevenor [former director of public relations and editor of the *Alumni Review*], friends and classmates of John Nichols were invited to a party at the Alexander Hamilton Inn with members of the cast, most notably Liza Minnelli. After cocktails, my wife Heidi and I were at the dinner table

with Ms. Minnelli, and with Sid Wertimer at the head. I'm not sure what prompted me to do my wind noise after we had had dessert, but soon others joined in with their party tricks. I remember Sid doing his famous lighthouse impersonation, where he would stand up with his arms in a U-shape, turning round and round and opening and closing his mouth and eyes like an occulting lighthouse light. After a few of us had performed, Liza, a performer's performer, proceeded to eat her cloth napkin — or try to! — John Von Bergen '63

■ It was the winter of 1969-70. My wife and I were vacationing at the Caribe Hilton in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Having recently seen and immensely enjoyed *The Sterile Cuckoo*, a familiar face came to my attention across the hotel pool. It was Liza Minnelli. She was being interviewed by columnist Rex Reed, but I decided to interrupt anyway. "Excuse me, Miss Minnelli," I said. "I think we have something in common." She recoiled at the intrusion and undoubtedly assumed she was being accosted by someone dangerous. Mr. Reed also

was not amused. Her bodyguard approached. Once Liza calmed down a bit, I explained I was a graduate of Hamilton College and had adored her movie. She suddenly warmed, threw her arms around me, and gushed that she had spent the most wonderful days of her life filming on campus. She spoke of the genuine hospitality she was accorded and her wish that she could have attended such a marvelous academic institution herself. We chatted for a few minutes, recounting our respective memories of the Hill, with poor Rex twiddling his thumbs. She said she hoped to return to Clinton someday (has she?) and relive the joy of her Hamilton experience. Liza's enthusiasm and spontaneity in person only reinforced my continuing admiration for her artistic ability, and she's still knockin' 'em dead 40 years later. Her casting as Pookie was brilliant, as the result showed. John Nichols couldn't have asked for a better performance to bring his unique character to life. And I couldn't have anticipated such a coincidental and poignant meeting in the Caribbean. — Paul Silverman '63

## A CAST OF NOVICES

PAKULA WAS AN ENIGMA — A 40-YEAR-OLD PRODUCER WITH HALF A DOZEN successful films and a 1962 Oscar nomination for *To Kill a Mockingbird* to his credit, but no directing experience. He discovered *The Sterile Cuckoo* in a New York City bookstore, secured the rights to the novel in May 1965 and quickly hired Nichols to take on the screenplay as well. "I traveled to Hollywood several times and we talked a lot," Nichols recalls, "and back in New York I did a few drafts of the movie between 1965 and '66." While Alvin Sargent (*Paper Moon*, *Julia*, *Ordinary People*, *Spider-Man*) eventually produced the bulk of the screenplay used for the movie, Nichols remained close to Pakula, scouting locations and possible actors for him and becoming a living resource for the film. "I certainly talked a lot with Pakula about my college life at Hamilton and the school's beautiful setting," he recalls. "Alan was gentle, compassionate, a lovely guy, and for whatever reasons the novel was very personal to him. He really grilled me about my life, my college days, my intimate relationships, everything."

Pakula first intended to bring a young director aboard to capture the adolescent turbulence of the characters. Then, he told Jared Brown in *Alan J. Pakula: His Films and His Life*, he came to a realization: "Why don't I use a man who is not quite so young, but who is certainly inexperienced, meaning myself."

He cast two relative unknowns, 22-year-old Liza Minnelli and 21-year-old Wendell Burton, in the lead roles; Minnelli had won a Tony and Burton had done *Charlie Brown* on stage, but neither had substantial film experience — making potential investors so skittish that Pakula eventually hid the screen tests he had done with the pair. Paramount agreed to finance the film "with much trepidation," Pakula told Brown.

Richard Spence '60 recalls the debate well — he negotiated the film contract with Minnelli as a young chief financial officer who had

recently come to Paramount after acquiring the film giant for Gulf and Western. She "had never been in a motion picture before, so we had to take a leap of faith as to whether she had any acting skill at all," he says. Though he didn't know Nichols and still has never met him, Spence played an instrumental role in ushering the novel to the screen and arranging to have it filmed on the Hill. "I arranged with Sid Wertimer to use the Hamilton campus and, in particular, the Theta Delt house," he says. He had a good working relationship with Wertimer from his student days: "He was the one who kept me in College after I had received four out of five F's," Spence says. "Sidney took me under his wing and showed me that I could do better."

## ROMANCE WITHOUT RELEVANCE?

THE FILM CONDENSES INTO A SINGLE SCHOOL YEAR A NARRATIVE THAT covers nearly three years of college life in Nichols' novel, but it otherwise broadly follows the novel's narrative. A story of two college innocents reeling through a doomed first love — Pookie Adams, motherless and unmoored, and Jerry Payne, mild and reserved — Pakula's version veers into the gloomier reaches of romantic comedy, but it avoids the book's bleak examination of early-1960s college life. Pookie and Jerry meet at a bus stop on their way to college at Wells and Hamilton, fictionalized as "Winslow" and "Harrisonville" in the film. Minnelli's Pookie is funny and smart, disdainful of convention yet desperate for attention; Burton's Jerry has a deer-in-the-headlights quality that leaves him perpetually backpedaling from Pookie's neediness. Both are too self-absorbed to engage the world in any real way, and — coupled with the pristine campus setting — the movie has an insulated, pastoral quality that seems quaint in the context of the political and ideological upheaval of the late '60s.

■ I certainly remember well the fall of 1968 and the remarkable parade of long-bed trailer trucks that descended on campus each morning. Bearing the vast assortment of sound, lighting, catering and other equipment needed for the filming of *The Sterile Cuckoo*, they were decidedly out of scale in our college setting. As class schedules would allow (and occasionally not!) quite a few of us, Hamilton and Kirkland students alike, answered the call for “extras” shouted up the stairwells of dormitories and fraternity houses by members of the Paramount Pictures crew. One distinct memory for me is the filming of the movie’s pivotal party scene. The band seen playing on screen is Hamilton’s own *King James Version* (a reference to soul music rather than the Bible). In addition to yours truly, the band included Benny Greenbaum, Bill

Powers, Dave Campbell and Eric Milligan, all members of the Class of 1969. The scene was filmed on the back porch of the Theta Delt house over parts of several days, and “Hamilton’s own” provided the sounds to which everyone moved. As I recall, a prodigious amount of beer was consumed during the filming, making it all the more an authentic Hill party. Regrettably, our brush with music immortality was just that. The music one hears in the movie is not the band’s but a studio overdub. Assuming, correctly of course, that this moment in time was likely as close as my journey would bring me to a Hollywood career, I tucked away my Paramount Pictures location talent (pay) voucher and still have it among the transcripts and other memories in my Hamilton College file.  
— Rob Harwood '69

■ As an about-to-be freshman, I was on campus before school started to take part in soccer practice. One day after practice we were told they would be filming the movie and needed extras to make up the crowd at what I later came to know as a houseparty. We went to the Theta Delt house, where our “job” was to stand around and drink beer, dance and generally have a good time. After a while the director stopped filming because the lighting wasn’t right and asked that we come back the next day to do the same thing. Of course, the party carried on after the filming stopped, and we did it again the next day. I remember thinking “Wow, college is great, they film movies here,” not knowing it was a unique event. — Tom Droesch '72

“I felt nervously that the movie was completely irrelevant to those turbulent times,” Nichols says, but he points out that Pakula is not wholly to blame. Nichols had written the novel between 1962 and '64 and published it at 24, before the political shift and personal awakening that would “catapult” him into what he now calls “rabid anti-imperialist mode.” The novel “must have some bite about the destructiveness of the social/party/fraternity scene at Hamilton,” he says, “and it certainly attempts to be a complex character study of a really desolate livewire girl.” But it lacked the raw social consciousness that he would soon develop; by 1968 and the filming of *Cuckoo*, he had “started writing novels that were so nihilistic and angry that I couldn’t get another book published for almost a decade.”

Deeply involved in the antiwar movement in Manhattan, Nichols returned to campus for just three days while *The Sterile Cuckoo* was being shot — long enough to do some publicity stills, watch a few scenes and have dinner at the Alexander Hamilton Inn with Pakula, Minnelli and others. “Liza kept laughing hysterically and tumbling over into my lap and asking me if I thought she was a good Pookie Adams,” he recalls. “She said she’d read the book once a week over the last year.”

## CAMPUS PLAYED STARRING ROLE

PAKULA AND HIS 65-MEMBER PARAMOUNT CREW WERE ON AND AROUND the Hill from Sept. 11 until Oct. 15, 1968. They rounded up about 125 Hamilton and Kirkland students to use as extras and filmed largely on campus. Jerry’s residence hall is a composite, and sharp-eyed Hamiltonians can still note the anomalies. When Jerry looks out his window, he is at 3 College Hill Road, looking across the street at 20 College Hill Road (the old Lambda Chi Alpha house), the “boarding house” where Pookie stays when visiting campus. In the scenes outside his residence, though, they’ve been transported to the front of Eells House (then the Alpha Delta Phi house) or — in the memorable houseparty sequence — to the back porch of Woollcott House (then the Theta Delta Chi house). Stairwell scenes were done in South Hall.

Other key scenes were done at Oudin’s Court in Sylvan Beach (now Sunset Cottages) and the Union Chapel next door — added to the script on the spot because the chapel’s proximity to Pookie and

Jerry’s love nest “seemed too good to be true,” Pakula told Brown. (Oddly, Hamilton’s Chapel went unused except for brief exterior shots.) The film’s cemetery scene, set in Hamilton’s cemetery in the novel, was moved to nearby Skyline Drive. Vernon Center’s park at the western end of College Hill Road served as the rural bus stop near “Winslow.” And the local flavor extends to Utica Club (which appears in an early dorm scene) and the Village Tavern (which gets a passing mention), long before product placement became a Hollywood cliché.

Because rain on the initial day of campus shooting forced the cast and crew indoors, the first thing shot was what turned out to be the movie’s signature scene, Pookie’s desperate phone conversation with Jerry in which she chokes back panic over his reluctance to see her during spring break. It was largely responsible for Minnelli’s Academy Award nomination, and it gave the film a moment of stark, powerful theatre to counterbalance some of its lighter romp-through-the-fields sentiment.

The tight shooting schedule over a few weeks in early fall also meant that Pakula had to abandon any hope of seasonal verisimilitude. In one scene set just after their return from winter break, Pookie and Jerry sit bundled against the “cold” in the branches of a sprawling Camperdown Elm — in full green leaf — behind Minor Theater.

## SPOTLIGHT FOR STAR-TO-BE FAISON

PAKULA HANDED SMALL BUT CREDITED ROLES TO HAMILTON STUDENTS Chris Bugbee '69 and Mark Fish '70 as well as Sandy Faison K'72, who — in the campus coup of the season — landed the role of Minnelli’s roommate, Nancy Putnam. “I had a glorious time doing it,” Faison says. Pookie describes Putnam in the novel as “a quiet girl with a feathery smile, trusting and simple and healthy looking, a sort of whimsical Shirley Temple, or a blond Breck Shampoo girl.” The character was downsized between novel and film, and Faison had only two substantial scenes, but the theatre major made the most of them on her way to a successful acting career and major roles in such Broadway productions as *Annie*, *You Can’t Take It With You* and *Loose Ends* as well as film, TV and teaching.



**John Nichols '62, in the middle of a dry stock pond on the mesa outside Taos, N.M., during a visit this summer with Ernest Williams, the Christian A. Johnson Professor of Biology. The region has been central to the author's environmental and political activism since he moved there from New York in 1969. "That stock pond has informed a lot of his thinking," Williams says. "He's seen it go through so many phases and stages."**

"I was dumb enough to audition but smart enough to know that these guys were the real deal," Faison says of Pakula and producer Robert Mulligan. "My impression of them was that they ran a tight ship and were really kind to youngsters who were working with them." Pakula, she recalls, "was a really extraordinary man and a calm presence. They were class acts, start to finish."

Faison's biggest scene comes toward the end of the film, during a student gathering where she plays guitar — her own idea. "They asked me, 'What would you do here in a party?'" she recalls. "And I said that I would play music. So they asked me to pick up the guitar and play something. It was great that my opinion actually meant something to the director." The performance was improvised, she says: "I had to think of something to play spur-of-the-moment. 'Greensleeves' was the only thing I could think of; it wasn't like I got to go home and practice."

While the personal rush of working with professionals — and going to California with Bugbee and Fish to do some of the filming — was intense, Faison says the effect on the whole campus — both Hamilton and the newly opened Kirkland College — was equally important. "It pulled the school together and made everyone really excited," she says.

## PARTYING FOR POSTERITY

WHAT MOST ALUMS OF A CERTAIN AGE RECALL BEST, HOWEVER, IS THE houseparty scene — a churning maze of bodies fueled by a live band and copious quantities of party beverages on the back porch of what was then the Theta Delt house. It was a Hamilton initiation for Tom Drosch '72, who had just arrived on campus and was told after soccer practice one day that extras were needed nearby for a crowd scene. "We went to the Theta Delt house, where our 'job' was to stand around and drink beer, dance and generally have a good time," he recalls. "After a while, the director stopped filming because the lighting wasn't right and asked that we come back the next day to do the same thing. Of course, the party carried on after the filming stopped, and we did it again the next day.

"I remember thinking, 'Wow, college is great, they film movies here!' — not knowing it was a unique event." The soundtrack for the

festivities was supplied by a very real student band, the King James Version — "a reference to soul music rather than the Bible," notes Rob Harwood '69, who was joined in the group by classmates Benny Greenbaum, Bill Powers, Dave Campbell and Eric Milligan. "As I recall, a prodigious amount of beer was consumed during the filming, making it all the more an authentic Hill party. Regretfully, our brush with music immortality was just that. The music one hears in the movie is not the band's, but a studio overdub." Despite the disappointment, Harwood has hung on to his "location talent voucher," which documents the cool \$78.34 he netted for three days' work.

One face you won't find in the party scene is that of Nichols. Pakula asked the novelist to make a cameo there — at what had in reality been Nichols' own fraternity house — but Nichols "vociferously declined," he recalls. "I was also appalled that all the houseparty extras were unrealistically dressed up like preppy yuppies instead of like slobbering gonzo chauvinist piglets."

But the angry young man who in 1968 was railing against both the darker traditions of college culture and the political inertia of the film based on his first novel has long since made his peace with both. "I mellowed a bit, and I became grateful once more for the charmed life I'd had at Hamilton," he says — particularly for the encouragement of "a great English Department that fanned my adoration of books."

Ultimately, *The Sterile Cuckoo* "made me queasy, and I think I've only seen it twice," Nichols says. But he notes that he had a similar reaction to two other films made from his novels, *The Wizard of Loneliness* and *The Milagro Beanfield War*. Two decades of working on screenplays himself with directors such as Louis Malle, Ridley Scott and Robert Redford led him to realize that "movies are a totally different discipline from novels."

Ultimately, Nichols says, "I thought Pakula made a gentle, delicate, awkward film. It made Liza Minnelli a star, got her an Academy Award nomination, won a Grammy for its sappy theme song, and sent Pakula on his way toward *All the President's Men* and *Sophie's Choice*, and Liza got to do *Cabaret*.

"You know, it wasn't *my* movie, it was *their* movie, as it should have been, and I'm glad it kind of worked out." ■