Introduction: Interviews and Conversations

“We had good talk, sir!”
—Samuel Johnson

The cover photo of this book depicts Steven Spielberg conferring with Whoopi Goldberg on the set of the director’s landmark classic, *The Color Purple* (1985). The film would not only have a profound impact on the career trajectories of both director and actor, but would mark a significant moment in the history of Classical Hollywood—from the 1920s to the waning years of the last century—as will be seen in this and many other interviews and conversations about films and filmmaking in this book.

Hollywood, as we have come to know it, seems always to have been around. Even back in the dusty nickelodeon days, before that “mystic commotion” of flickering images became the big business of a global industry, we sensed its presence and its promise. Only the benefit of years of hindsight, however, rather than the application of calipers and measuring sticks, can gain us any sense of its proper proportion. Similarly, only now, as I take the long view of my more than 40 years of interviews—a selection of which is collected in this volume—can I grasp the composite portrait of Hollywood it affords. I could echo the words of Otis Ferguson, written in 1940:

> The movies were upon us before anyone had time to grow up and become a professor in them. They literally grew out of the people, the hundreds of thousands of people who jumped in to produce, distribute, exhibit, direct, write for, or act in a popular commodity.\(^1\)

Thus, like Hollywood itself, *Those Who Made It* just sort of accumulated. Once inside these talks, I am now outside them. I can see that, taken together, they provide a kind of running oral commentary on the history of classical Hollywood. The result is not unlike the classic Grimm tale, “The Juniper Tree,” wherein those scattered bones hint at a deeper, collective shape and meaning.
What was it like to work “behind the scenes,” away from the spotlight’s glare, in Hollywood’s so-called “Golden Age”? The complexity of the film industry involves a collective interchange among the directors, producers, cinematographers, writers, animators, editors, composers, stunt persons, critics, and, yes, historians and film preservationists. Differentiating their distinctive roles is, as always, a complicated endeavor. In its own modest way, the first-hand interviews and conversations in *Those Who Made It* provide some sense of identification. Moreover, they consider crucial moments and developments in the speakers’ personal and professional experiences.²

These were the years spanning the dawn of sound to the expanded global reach of the new century, when the so-called “classical modes” of studio production, technological innovation, narrative paradigms, genre paradigms, and business practices were developed, standardized, and extended. Despite the many shocks to that system, including federally-imposed consent decrees, the competition of television, an evolving social consciousness, experiments in narrative strategies, and the rise of independent filmmakers and modes of distribution and exhibition, etc., it can (and has) been argued that classical Hollywood absorbed them all and prevailed. As Jean-Luc Godard noted in 1980, “Hollywood no longer exists in the same way, but it re-exists in another way.”³

This chorus of voices, is a diverse lot, to be sure. Moving from one to the other pin-wheels us off in many directions. But the “voice” that unifies them all is mine. I sought out these encounters myself, video camera and tape recorder in hand; with no apologies, I approached them with respect and affection. The soul of good conversation, after all, is sympathy. Except for a few opportunities in television studios and on Hollywood studio-organized junkets, most were done in the more intimate, casual confines of private homes, classrooms, back stage, even a few bars and watering holes. I have found that in the relative unreserve of such private discourse, as William Hazlitt has observed,

*The subjects are more at liberty to say what they think, to put the subject in different and opposite points of view ... to obviate misconception, to state difficulties on their own side of the argument, and answer them as well as they can.*⁴

I took advantage of my privileged access as a former radio and television journalist for CBS television, pursued inside contacts in Hollywood as editor of the National Film Society’s *American Classic Screen*, and deployed academic connections as a Professor of Film at the University of Kansas. Finally, I found these people at specific moments in time. Some look back at their careers from the long end of history; while others are *in the moment*, reacting to the flux and change of their personal and professional lives.