

# Thunder on the Left: The Making of *Reds*

On the box-office coattails of 1978's *Heaven Can Wait*, Warren Beatty seized his chance to defy Hollywood wisdom by making *Reds*, a big-budget docudrama sympathetic to the Russian Revolution. The star-director-producer's creative obsession, from the volatile scriptwriting wars to the relentless retakes that reduced Jack Nicholson nearly to tears and helped send Beatty's romance with Diane Keaton into meltdown, resulted in a stunning epic about American Communists.

By Peter Biskind

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Beatty on the set of *Reds*. "I can't trust anybody to direct this movie but me," he told an associate. "If Kubrick called me tomorrow I'd turn him down. But I hate the idea. To be a director, you have to be sick." *Photographs by David Appleby.*

When one of Arnold Schwarzenegger's aides called Warren Beatty a "crackpot"—among other choice epithets—after Beatty had taken a few shots at the California governor not long ago, one thing the aide refrained from calling Beatty was a "dilettante." Because, as anybody who has even a glancing familiarity with his career knows, Beatty has been a very serious political amateur for decades, at least since he backed Bobby Kennedy for president in 1968, and then became a visible supporter of gun control after Kennedy's assassination. Four years later he was doggedly pounding the pavement for George McGovern, helping to organize a then groundbreaking series of rock-concert fund-raisers. It was during this period—the night after McGovern won the Democratic nomination at a deeply divided convention in Miami, which Beatty attended—that he took a break from campaigning to hole up in a hotel room and spend four days working on a treatment that would eventually become *Reds*, one of the most audacious and politically literate movies ever to come out of Hollywood.

Released a quarter-century ago, on December 4, 1981, *Reds* is a sprawling, three-hour-and-twenty-minute homage, of sorts, to the Russian Revolution as well as to the high passions that animated the largely forgotten American left in the years before, during, and after World War I. The film is an achievement nearly unparalleled in the history of American cinema—ambitious, complex, and entertaining in equal measures. It is partly a biopic, centered on the short but eventful life of the writer and activist John Reed, one of the few Americans buried in the Kremlin, whose account of the bloody birth of the Soviet Union, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, is a classic of political journalism. It is partly a love story, re-creating Reed's tumultuous relationship with fellow journalist Louise Bryant. It is partly a historical drama that chronicles, among other things, the rise of Bolshevism and the birth of the Communist Party of America. And it is partly a documentary, one that rescues from oblivion 32 actual survivors of that period who serve as a kind of Greek chorus.



The real John Reed, circa 1920.  
*From Sovfoto.*

Not only did *Reds* pioneer the blend of fact and fiction that later came to be known as "docudrama," it was also an unapologetic, if critical, major-studio treatment of Communism, lavishing on this mostly taboo subject the vast resources at Hollywood's disposal: a big budget, A-list stars, and, in this case, the brains, skills, and talents of

the best and the brightest of Hollywood's most recent—and probably final—golden age. All of this at a moment that could not have been less hospitable to the subject. Beatty began shooting the picture in 1979, the year the Russians invaded Afghanistan; production continued throughout 1980, the year America elected a new president, Ronald Reagan, who

campaigning with open hostility to the Soviet Union and, once in office, would famously dub it the “evil empire.” *Reds* was so unlikely a film for Hollywood, and its timing so unpropitious, that many in Beatty’s orbit, including the screenwriter Robert Towne and the film critic Pauline Kael, begged him not to make it, convinced that *Reds* was a folly.

Looking back from the present, a time characterized by the corporate consolidation of the movie industry, filmmaking by committee, and creative timidity, the fact that *Reds* was made at all is almost incomprehensible—testimony to the vision and persistence of one man. As one of Beatty’s longtime collaborators, the late production designer Dick Sylbert, once told me, “Talk about obsessed! His ability to will something to happen was mind-boggling.”

*Reds* was a labor of love, but labors of love—Kevin Spacey’s *Beyond the Sea* and John Travolta’s *Battlefield Earth* come to mind—are generally dubious propositions in the film business; studio executives are right to run for the hills when a powerful star, director, or producer knocks on the door with a personal project to which he or she has long given tender care, and this was never truer than in the late 70s, a time when the once astringent talents of the New Hollywood were giving way to bloat and self-indulgence. While Beatty was pitching *Reds* (which he might have described as the movie David Lean would have made had Gillo Pontecorvo, director of *The Battle of Algiers*, put a knife to his throat), United Artists was still looking down the barrel of Francis Ford Coppola’s troubled, much-delayed, and phenomenally expensive *Apocalypse Now*. Worse, UA was about to wade knee-deep into the quicksand of Michael Cimino’s studio-busting \*Heaven’s Gate.\* Universal, meanwhile, was still reeling from *Sorcerer*, Billy Friedkin’s expensive 1977 flop, and was about to lose a bundle more on Steven Spielberg’s overproduced, unfunny comedy, *1941*. *Reds* and Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* would be exceptions that proved the rule, although the former, with its lengthy dialogue scenes devoted to parsing the factional infighting on the American left, was still a big mouthful to swallow. Beatty, who at the time was coming off the huge comedy hit *Heaven Can Wait*, which minted money for Paramount, was probably the only star with the clout (or desire) to launch a major motion picture that would dramatize the Russian Revolution from a not entirely unsympathetic perspective—and get a studio to pay for it. As former Paramount production head Bob Evans puts it in his inimitable fashion, “Warren could dictate what he wanted to make. [*Reds*] was his come shot after *Heaven Can Wait*.”

Born to comfortable circumstances in Portland, Oregon, Reed had gone to Harvard. Once he cast off the remnants of his bourgeois background—says Beatty, “It took me quite a while to get over the fact that he was a cheerleader at Harvard”—Reed came into his own as a journalist, poet, and radical, torn between his aspirations to art and to political activism, a conflict Beatty could relate to. And, like Beatty at the start of his career, when the actor’s dating games made him a fixture of the gossip columns and sometimes upstaged his considerable gifts as a performer, Reed had something to prove. He was too much fortune’s child—too good-looking, too well-off, too talented—to be taken seriously. Upton Sinclair once called Reed “the Playboy of the Revolution,” something else Beatty could relate to.

Reed was also an adventurer, inexorably drawn to the action. And in the teens of the last century, the action was on the left, among American unions such as the Industrial Workers

of the World (also known as the Wobblies) and, abroad, in places such as Mexico, where the peasants were making a revolution with machetes—and, better yet, the volcano that was czarist Russia. Reed went to Russia three times: in 1915 to cover World War I, in 1917 as a participant-observer in the Russian Revolution—he was in St. Petersburg when the czar's Winter Palace fell—and in 1920 to plead for Soviet accreditation of his newly formed Communist Labor Party. When he wanted to return to America, the Soviets refused to let him go. He tried to cross the border into Finland and landed in a Finnish jail for his trouble. He was finally released to the Soviets, and spent what little was left of his life working in their propaganda ministry, writing and making speeches. He died of typhus in 1920, three days before his 33rd birthday.

The love of Reed's life was Louise Bryant, a dentist's wife he lured from Portland to New York to join the ranks of artists and revolutionaries who peopled Greenwich Village. She too was a journalist with large appetites: she had an affair with Eugene O'Neill, went to cover World War I from the front in France, and followed Reed to Russia twice, all the time struggling to carve out her own career. After Reed's death she tumbled downhill into alcoholism, drug addiction, and poverty. She died in 1936 at the age of 50.

Beatty recalls coming across Reed's story in the mid-1960s. He says, "When you're very, very young, you hear, 'John Reed: Harvard guy gets over [to Russia] and ends up being buried in the Kremlin wall,' and then you find out later that he traveled with Pancho Villa, so after you read *Ten Days That Shook the World*, you read *Insurgent Mexico*," which was Reed's first book. The film editor Dede Allen recalls Beatty's mentioning the idea of putting Reed's life on film as far back as 1966. "We were sitting in a Chinese restaurant having lunch when he said, 'Have you ever heard of Jack Reed?'"

"Yes."

"I'm going to do his story one day."

In 1966, "one day" was still more than a decade off—Beatty was then in the midst of producing and starring in *Bonnie and Clyde*—but he was serious about Reed, whose story clearly had vivid cinematic potential. The actor had taught himself some Russian and in 1969 visited the Soviet Union with his then girlfriend Julie Christie. The Soviet director Sergei Bondarchuk, who had just filmed *War and Peace*, wanted to make a movie about Reed himself and asked the actor to star in it. But Beatty didn't like the script and turned Bondarchuk down. Instead, Beatty told me, "I asked [the Soviet authorities], 'Can I talk to some people who might have known Reed?' They said there was this woman who claims to have had an affair with him. I said, 'Can I meet her?' They took me out to her apartment on the seventh floor of one of those temporary-looking postwar buildings. She was about 80. Her mother was close to Lenin's wife, and there is a picture of her, at the age of 15, an incredibly beautiful little girl, standing next to Lenin. I said, 'Did you have a romance with John Reed?' She said to me in Russian, 'A romance? I fucked him!' I said, 'Were you ever in a labor camp?' And she said, 'Oh, yes.' I said, 'How long were you there?' She said, 'Oh, 16 years.' I said, 'How do you feel about Stalin?' She said, 'Only hate. But of course the revolution is in its early stages.' It was at that moment I thought, I have to make a movie about that kind of passion. I'm going to make it without the Russians. And just the way I want to make it." In Beatty's eyes, Reed had for too long been the exclusive property of the

Soviet Union. "I felt some sort of need to protect this poor American who was buried in the Kremlin wall. His ideals were not owned by Soviet Communism."

For all the similarities between Beatty and Reed, the differences are striking as well. Where Reed was impulsive and given to extreme solutions, politically, Beatty is deliberate, slow to act, and liberal, not radical. He worked on Reed's story, fitfully, throughout the early 1970s, writing about 25 pages. At the time, he was hitting his stride professionally, a cinematic polymath who was able to do everything well and often did. Not only was he one of the most sought-after leading men throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, but his love life was still manna to the gossip sheets. With *Bonnie and Clyde*, which had kicked off the New Hollywood revolution, in 1967, he had become one of the first actors to succeed at hands-on producing, so much so that on subsequent projects he was known as the equal of canny studio negotiators such as Frank Wells and Barry Diller. He produced, co-wrote, and starred in two successful comedies, 1975's *Shampoo* and 1978's *Heaven Can Wait*, the latter of which he co-directed as well, with Buck Henry. Nevertheless, according to Henry, while on the set of that film Beatty had to listen to Christie, his co-star, mock him for being lightweight. The John Reed film would be far from a comedy, and Beatty knew that if he was ever going to make it this was the time, when he had both clout and command of his craft.

In 1976 he had finally found a writer for the project: Trevor Griffiths, a successful playwright whose London hit, *Comedians*, Mike Nichols was taking to Broadway. A Marxist intellectual, Griffiths wasn't about to get his head turned by a movie star. According to Jeremy Pikser, a protégé of Griffiths's, whom Beatty hired as a research consultant and who later went on to co-write *Bulworth* with Beatty, "Trevor felt, 'I'm a historian, a playwright. You're a Hollywood movie star. What can you tell me about how to tell the story of John Reed?' I couldn't imagine two less likely people to have an effective collaboration."

To Griffiths it was clear how much Beatty identified with Reed. "Warren spoke as if he was the reincarnation of Jack Reed," Griffiths says. "Reed was a golden boy. I would get that sense as we talked that Warren had been born to play him. Or Jack Reed had been born so that at a later moment Warren could play him!"

Griffiths's wife was killed in an airplane crash while he was working on the script, which delayed a first draft considerably. He finally finished around the end of 1977. "Warren rang me up and said, 'This is wonderful. This is just terrific. I've got to read it again,'" he recalls. "When he rang me again about it, a week later, there was a completely different tone to his voice. He basically wanted to start again, keep the outline, keep the shape, keep some of the characterizations, and begin again. And, indeed, that's what we did."

According to Pikser, "The first script was much more tendentious. Humorless. It was much more historical, in that the relationship between John Reed and Louise Bryant was not nearly as modern. And Reed was more of a character than a vehicle for Warren Beatty. In one scene, Reed embraced Louise and said, 'Your hair smells like damsons.' Damsons are a kind of plum, and they do exist in America, and they are likely something that Reed might have known about and, as a poet, might have made a reference to. But Warren's attitude was 'What the fuck is a damson? And I sure would never say that about a woman! What kind of an idiot is this guy Trevor Griffiths? It must be some sort of English thing.' But I

don't think Warren hated the script any more than he hates other first drafts. He never has a draft he likes. It's never 'O.K., now the script is done,' in my experience. It's like 'Let's work on it.' You go into a film re-writing while it's being shot."

Says Beatty, "That draft had serious problems. There was no tension between Bryant and Reed. What I needed to do was pit her feminism against his chauvinism, turn a woman who was in love with a man against that man."

Griffiths returned to New York in the middle of 1978 to hash out the script with Beatty. "We sat down in a hotel bedroom at the Carlyle and we worked for about four and a half months," Griffiths recalls. "It was a pretty unpleasant four and a half months ... really painful. I was sitting in a room for six or eight hours a day with a guy that I was increasingly growing to detest, and who was increasingly growing to detest me. That's the Sartrean version of hell."

In his everyday exchanges, Beatty is invariably polite and soft-spoken, with a dry wit. When he's relaxed and unguarded, as unguarded as he ever gets, he's ribald and funny. He rarely loses his temper, rarely allows himself to get annoyed or irritable. But script meetings are, for Beatty, something else: free-for-alls, extreme combat. "When you're collaborating, you have to be able to take the gloves off," Beatty says. He is a firm believer in the adage that two (or more) minds are better than one. He calls them "hostile intelligences." But, observes Pikser, "it's often more hostile than intelligent." He goes on, "Warren functions creatively in a pugilistic manner. He likes to fight. It's not fun to fight with a stupid person, so he likes to have smart people to fight with. You stop working on the script, he's sweet as honey. You start working on a script, you can expect to be abused. Anybody who's ever worked with him who doesn't admit that is lying. That's how he is with Robert Towne, that's how he is with Elaine May, but they love it. They throw things, they scream. They swear at each other. I think they feel that this is what it means to be creative. The first time I met Towne"—the screenwriter kibitzed on *Reds*, as did writer-director May, more extensively—"he walked up to me and he said, 'I just want you to know something.' Right up in my face. 'I don't give a fuck about history.' I was like, 'What do you want from me, man? I'm just a kid here.'"

After the four-and-a-half-month stint at the Carlyle, Griffiths told Beatty in late August or September 1978—nearly two years after their work on *Reds* had begun—that he had to go back to London. Beatty said, "I'm coming with you!" So they ended up together again, this time working at the Dorchester hotel, in London. "The atmosphere around us was poisonous, terrible," says Griffiths. "It was messy, it was vile, it was foulmouthed on both sides."

There is a key sequence aboard a train near the end of the script during which Reed berates Zinoviev, a Soviet functionary, for re-writing his speeches. Suddenly, in the middle of the dispute, the White Army, the counterrevolutionaries, attack the train. Griffiths complained about the scene.

"Do we really need this scene?" he asked. "What is important is the argument, not the attack on the train."

“Listen,” Griffiths recalls Beatty’s saying. “One thing you have to learn: in a movie, one bullet is worth a thousand words.”

“That’s terrible, because I’m a writer, and all I’ve got are words,” exploded Griffiths. And then, he recalls, “Beatty exploded, and I exploded again and walked out of the room, packed my bag, and left. And never saw him again.”

Of course, Beatty was right. *Reds* was not a novel or a play, it was a movie, a popular entertainment, or at least that was the hope. Would people go for it? “That’s the great thing about Warren,” says Pikser. “It’s a gamble. That’s what makes it fun. If he thinks there’s no chance that people will hate it, he’s not interested in doing it.”

It was Leslie Caron, a former flame of Beatty’s, who once observed that he “has always fallen in love with girls who have won or been nominated for an Academy Award.” Caron qualified, Christie too, and so did Diane Keaton, who had won best actress for *Annie Hall*, in 1977. Slender, pale as porcelain, and radiating a nervous intelligence, Keaton was an original. She was adorable as Woody Allen’s neurotic match in *Annie Hall*, and single-handedly started a fashion trend with her gender-bending mix-and-match wardrobe of ties, trousers, and skirts.

“I remember the first time I ever saw Warren. I must have been about 26,” Keaton recalls, placing the incident in the early 70s when her career was just beginning to flower. “It was at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. They used to have a bookstore there, and I was inside, and I looked out and saw him in the lobby. I thought, My god, he’s so beautiful. It was like there was a light. He looked at me for a second, and then [his eyes] passed me by. I thought, I’ll never know him. He’ll never be somebody in my life.”

But she was wrong. A few years later they hooked up during the frenzy that followed upon the success of *Heaven Can Wait*, and Beatty became equally intoxicated, though the relationship proved to be a difficult one. According to Pikser, who spent a lot of time with the couple, “Warren was always trying to please Diane. Which was not easy. Which is why he wanted to do it so much. It’s no fun for him if it’s easy. He really likes women who kick his ass. He always moaned about it, but I think it’s what drew him to her. She was very difficult.” Pikser adds, “It was a very contentious, complicated relationship. It was very volatile. He bought her a pair of handcuffs, as either a Christmas or a birthday gift. I took that as an ironic comment on her feeling that he wanted to constrain her. Or maybe they were just into that!” (Says Beatty, “God help me, no, I’ve never been into that. The idea of handcuffs as sexual paraphernalia has always made me laugh. And there would be about as much chance of Diane Keaton being into that kind of stuff as there would be of her becoming interested in skydiving.”)

Beatty—who has a long history of working with current and former lovers—wanted Keaton to play Bryant. He regarded her as something of a muse, or at least that’s what he told the press at the time: “If Diane Keaton had not made *Reds*, I don’t know what I would have done.” He says now, “She’s always surprising. And that’s fun. It would have been kind of heavy going to have these two idealists go through this idealistic period without some surprises. And some laughs.”

When Beatty had first asked Keaton to play Bryant, the actress was skeptical. “I didn’t really believe it was going to happen,” she recalls. “He would say, ‘We’re going to shoot now,’ and then we would not shoot now, and then he would say, ‘O.K., the next few months, probably,’ and it kept getting put off and put off for what seemed like an endless amount of time. So it really wasn’t a reality until we were actually in England, and we started to shoot. And then I believed we were doing it.”

The other key role was Eugene O’Neill, Reed’s friend and Bryant’s lover. The historical O’Neill was tall and lanky, with a boozier’s pallor. Beatty first thought of casting James Taylor, who had the look of an addict, someone who knew pain. Or Sam Shepard, of which the same was true. In the end he chose his pal Jack Nicholson, with whom he had appeared in *The Fortune* (1975) for Mike Nichols. As the story goes, Beatty tricked Nicholson into accepting the smallish but important part by ostensibly asking for advice. “I told him I needed someone to play Eugene O’Neill, but it had to be someone who could convincingly take this woman away from me,” Beatty once told an interviewer. Without missing a beat, Nicholson responded, “There is only one actor who could do that—me!”



Nicholson, as Eugene O’Neill, and Beatty, as journalist-activist John Reed, during the filming of the movie’s Provincetown scenes.

Nevertheless, says executive producer Simon Relph, “Warren worried and worried about casting Jack, because, frankly, both of them were too old to play the parts. When we met with Jack, he was doing *The Shining*. It was towards the end of the film, and Kubrick had got him into the most shambolic state. A kind of grotesque figure appeared. We only had three or four months before shooting. Warren said to me, ‘Do you think Jack can get in shape?’ I said, ‘If he wants to do it, I’m sure he can.’ He did really want to do it. When it was time, he appeared, having shed a huge amount of weight, and all the years. He was fantastic.”

The rest of the cast included Maureen Stapleton, who would prove to be splendid as Emma Goldman, the anarchist; Paul Sorvino, who played Italian-American firebrand Louis Fraina, a leader of the infant Communist Party of America; and Gene Hackman, who had the small part of a

magazine editor. Beatty was largely using British locations to stand in for American ones such as Provincetown and Greenwich Village, and because he was worried the locales



wouldn't be convincing to U.S. audiences, he took care to populate the picture with veteran Hollywood character actors such as Ian Wolfe, R. G. Armstrong, Jack Kehoe, and M. Emmet Walsh, who were familiar to audiences from dozens of movies. Beatty also cast some non-actors in important roles. George Plimpton, the editor of *The Paris Review*, played a fashionable publisher who tries to seduce Bryant. Plimpton was offered the part when he nearly tripped over Beatty while the actor was asleep on the floor of the Playboy Mansion; Plimpton later clinched the deal by putting the moves on Keaton with such conviction during an audition that Beatty yelled, "Stop it!" Another non-actor, the novelist Jerzy Kosinski, was brilliant as Zinoviev, the Soviet apparatchik. An outspoken anti-Communist who had been born in Poland, Kosinski initially turned Beatty down because he feared he would be kidnapped by the K.G.B. while on location in Finland.

Beatty hadn't originally intended to act in or direct the film. He knew how difficult it was simply to produce. He considered casting John Lithgow, who physically resembled Reed, but eventually decided to do it himself, just as he became convinced there was no one else to hold the reins behind the camera. He told Sylbert, "I can't trust anybody to direct this movie but me. If Kubrick called me tomorrow I'd turn him down. But I hate the idea. To be a director, you have to be sick." He surrounded himself with collaborators who could help him, and was able, as he had in the past, to attract the best in the business. Sylbert, who had just put in three years as head of production at Paramount, was arguably the most skilled production designer in Hollywood and had worked with Beatty on *Shampoo*. Dede Allen, whose innovative cutting created the jackrabbit velocity that helped drive *Bonnie and Clyde* to critical and commercial success, was the best editor in New York. Vittorio Storaro, who was responsible for Bernardo Bertolucci's stunningly photographed pictures and had most recently survived *Apocalypse Now*, was a master of lush color and the moving camera—though what worked for Bertolucci didn't always work for Beatty, who was raised at the knee of George Stevens, the Hollywood classicist who had directed him in *The Only Game in Town* and who never moved his camera.

Beatty came up with the idea of filming talking-head interviews with survivors of the period who knew or knew of Reed; they were called the Witnesses. Pikser remembers, "The way it was explained to me was 'Look, the thing that kills historical dramas is exposition. We have an audience which doesn't know the first fucking thing about any of this stuff, and if we're going to educate them with the dialogue, it's going to be deadly—it will ruin the film. So why not just take the bull by the horns, and let's say, 'We're going to make a little documentary, and we'll get the information we need, but it won't be purely didactic. It will be funny. It will have entertainment value.'" It was brilliant."

Mischievously, Beatty begins the film with the Witnesses talking about the unreliability of memory, its lapses and the tricks it plays. The interviewees included Roger Baldwin, who founded the American Civil Liberties Union, and the writers Rebecca West and Henry Miller, whose *Tropic of Cancer*, published by Grove Press in 1961, struck an early blow for the "sexual revolution" when the Supreme Court ruled it literature, not pornography. Dede Allen remembers how Beatty had read an interview with Miller where he described himself as "the Warren Beatty of his day." Says Allen, "Miller had nothing to do with Jack Reed, but Warren just wanted to interview him." (Beatty says Miller knew Emma Goldman, and Beatty wanted his take on the period.) Pikser wrote Miller a polite letter. Miller wrote back

saying, “You seem to be after the same kind of academic crap I’ve always hated my whole life. I think I would be terrible for you. There’s no way you could make use of me. I don’t think I would like to meet you. I don’t think you would like to meet me.” Pikser was crushed, wrote an abject apology: “You misunderstood me. We think you’d be great, blah-blah.” He showed it to Beatty, who said, “Throw that out. Send him a telegram: PERFECT! WHEN CAN WE ARRIVE?” Pikser did so, and the next thing he knew he had an invitation to dinner at Miller’s house, along with the young actress Brenda Venus, Miller’s final, though platonic, girlfriend. (He was a spry 88.) His only request was that Beatty help Venus find a movie part. (There was no role for her in *Reds*.)

After Griffiths walked out, Beatty continued to work on the script by himself, and then brought in Elaine May, with whom he had written *Heaven Can Wait*. May presented herself as kooky and fragile, a delicate flower, someone unequipped to deal with the real world, an impression she nurtured and seemed to enjoy, because she would make jokes about it. But once she swung into writing mode, she was like another person: confident, self-assured, and opinionated. Some of the work was done at the Plaza Athénée in Paris—one of several hotels around the world where Beatty liked to hang out. May would fly in on the Concorde. At the hotel she’d use the floor of her suite for a desk, laying out on the rug six or seven different scenes, each one in three versions written in longhand on yellow lined paper. Housekeeping was barred from the room, so that after a few days (she never went out) room-service trays covered with dirty dishes and leftover food were stacked in piles. She chain-smoked tiny cigars and let the ashes fall where they might.

May, whose contribution to the script—and later the editing process—was incalculable, focused on the scenes between Reed and Bryant, and Bryant and O’Neill. Unlike Griffiths, May understood that Beatty was the star, that Reed was in large part a vehicle for him, and that the Reed-Bryant relationship had to have contemporary resonance; the tension between the two protagonists, although rooted in the historical reality of the period, had to crackle with the passions that roiled the 1970s, particularly the women’s movement. According to Pikser, she said, “I don’t know anything about this history.” But somebody needed to, so she insisted that he be integrated into the process. Holding up some pages, she would say, “Jack and Emma Goldman need to fight here. I don’t know what the fuck they would fight about,” and throw him a pad.

Beatty had been financing script development and the pre-production of *Reds* out of his own pocket. “That’s the way I usually do things, because I’m what is called a control freak,” he explains with a laugh. But he was not about to launch into a film as expensive as this one might be without studio backing. By this time the studios had recovered from the New Hollywood fever of the early 1970s, were sitting up in bed and beginning to eat solid food, especially Paramount, now run by a group of Young Turks recruited from television—Barry Diller, Michael Eisner, and Don Simpson—and presided over by the choleric but brilliant financier Charles Bluhdorn, chairman of Paramount’s parent corporation, Gulf & Western. *Heaven Can Wait* had made a lot of money for Paramount, and when the Oscar nominations were announced in February 1979, the film received nine. While making it, Beatty had charmed Bluhdorn, and he already knew Diller, who headed the studio, through Democratic Party politics, but Beatty knew that *Reds* was still going to be a tough sell.

He did what he always did: he played the field, making the studios compete for his favors. He had interested Warner Bros. in the picture. Still, Paramount was his first choice, and the executives there were both wary and intrigued. "I'd been hearing about *Reds* for years," says Diller. "It's like remembering when you first heard about Santa Claus. It was pervasive. I was fascinated by it. I thought it was an impossible idea for a movie, but Warren created success with *Heaven Can Wait*, and if you create success you are entitled to extra room." Diller, Eisner, and Beatty had a dinner with Bluhdorn in New York to discuss *Reds*; the Gulf & Western chairman's blessing would be prudent for a film as potentially expensive and controversial as this one. Diller remembers that Bluhdorn was enthusiastic about the project, but in Beatty's recollection Bluhdorn was cooler toward the idea, and Beatty's pitch hardly made *Reds* sound like a no-brainer: "Look, this is an iffy project about a Communist hero who dies in the end. It may be a very dodgy commercial subject. If you say no, there's no hard feelings, and I'll take it somewhere else."

"How much is it gonna cost?" asked the Austrian-born Bluhdorn, who spoke in a thick accent his executives enjoyed mimicking.

"I've got to be honest with you," Beatty answered. "I don't know. But it's a long, long movie." Beatty subsequently gave Bluhdorn a copy of what then passed for the script and sat outside his office door while he read it. Bluhdorn finally said yes. But, Beatty recalls, "He made the movie because he didn't want to lose the movie."

And a few days later, Bluhdorn came down with a bad case of buyer's remorse. Bluhdorn told Beatty, "Do me a favor. Take \$25 million. Go to Mexico. Keep \$24 million for yourself. Spend the one million on a picture. Just don't make this one." Beatty replied, "Charlie, I have to make this movie." Beatty then got a call from one of Bluhdorn's pals. (The Gulf & Western head was suspected of nurturing Mob connections, among them the attorney and Hollywood fixer Sidney Korshak, though Beatty says the caller was not Korshak.) The man said, "If you know what's good for you, you shouldn't make this picture!" Beatty replied, "I'm going to do this movie and I'm going to forget that I got this call." Finally, Bluhdorn acceded to the inevitable and agreed to finance the film, whose budget was then hovering in the \$20 million range.

Once the studio agreed to do the picture, the executives reversed field, forcing Beatty to start production before he wanted to. "I didn't consider the script to be ready, but then, I never consider any script to be ready," he says. "But I did say I can be much more economical if I have another month. To prepare and rehearse, etc." According to Beatty, who believed that waiting could help him shave millions off the budget, the studio replied, "No. The contract says you start on this date, and if you don't start on this date, you're in default, and we have no arrangement." Continues Beatty, "It was odd." He wondered if Paramount was looking for an excuse to pull the plug on the picture. Finally, he acquiesced. "So I started—kind of slowly. There are some movies that you make that just can't be clarified on paper, and they make themselves as you go along. You adhere to Napoleon's battle plan. When they asked him how he planned a battle, he said, 'Here's how I do it—first I go there, and then I see what happens.'"

Principal photography began in early August of 1979 in London. Recalls Simon Relph, "The budget was actually quite low, given how ambitious a film it was, but it started to swell

once we began shooting, and it became clear that we were never going to do it in the time we were supposed to. We more than doubled the production time. I think the original intention was probably 15 or 16 weeks. We actually shot the film over a whole year, some 30-odd weeks, plus these 'hiatuses' where Warren went back to the drawing board."

The picture was plagued by the same problems that befall most productions, but with a movie this big, shot in five countries, the snafus were magnified tenfold. The crew had to wait for snow to fall in Helsinki and for rain to stop in Spain, where at one juncture there was an insurrection by the extras, about 1,000 of them, gathered for a crowd scene. The day was very hot, and the extras had been up since four in the morning. The caterers had failed to give them breakfast rolls, and by lunchtime they were starving, with little more to eat than fruit, while they watched the crew chow down on a three-course meal. "They came storming into where we were eating, banging trays, and looking to turn over tables," recalls production manager Nigel Wooll. Beatty, who was furious with him and Relph, handled the situation like the enlightened capitalist he is, in a manner that might have made Reed turn over in his grave. As Wooll recalls, "He said, 'O.K., bring the two ringleaders here, and let me talk to them.' He told them, 'You're right. We apologize, and we'll put you in charge of extras, and we'll pay you more money.' They both said yes, and there was absolutely no problem at all. He took the sting out of the tail."

The problems caused by the extras were nothing compared with those caused by the actors. Says Wooll, "Maureen Stapleton wouldn't fly to London. We wanted her in November, but in November there are no oceangoing liners across the Atlantic because it's too rough. So we offered to put her on the Concorde, which would have been three and a half hours, with a doctor who would put her to sleep, but she wouldn't do it. She was absolutely happy to come on a tramp steamer. It was supposed to take about two weeks. But of course it broke down halfway across and had to be towed into Amsterdam. So that was another delay. Then of course she has to get a train, and the boat from Amsterdam back to London. A horrendous trip."

Meanwhile, on the set, "Do it again" had become the operative phrase. Beatty shot an impressive number of takes. He generally liked to give himself lots of choices in the editing room, and always thought that the best take was just around the corner. Explains Beatty, "I don't ask for a lot of takes except when I'm directing and acting in a scene. It's no fun for the person who's acting with you to be watched. It kills the performance. You can't say, 'Well, no, I want you to change this and open your eyes there,' and so forth, all that bullshit—you don't. What you do is you do it again. And you hire good actors."

Customarily, a director will say "Cut" at the end of a take, and the cast and crew will break while the director of photography prepares for the next one. According to Wooll, Beatty "wouldn't stop the camera. Instead of going to Take 1, Take 2, Take 3, he'd do it all in one run until the roll of film ran out, after 10 minutes. He would just say, 'Do it again,' 'Do it again,' 'Do it again.'" But this created its own peculiar problems. Wooll recalls, "We burned out three camera motors because they overheated. I've never, ever burned out a camera motor before or since. It was extraordinary." One day they discovered that the focus was soft on some of the dailies of the scenes between Keaton and Nicholson. "We were going crazy," remembers Dede Allen. The default response would have been to fire the focus

puller, but Storaro demurred. After some investigation, he discovered, in Allen's words, "that the magazine would get hot and slightly move the film from the gate by the most minute amount," thereby distorting the focus.

Some of the actors welcomed the challenge of working for Beatty. Says Paul Sorvino, who did as many as 70 takes for one of his scenes, "It was a point of pride with me to do as many as Warren wanted. It was like 'Yeah? You want another one? How 'bout 10 more? How about 20 more?' It was that young macho thing in me that said I could stand up to anything Warren [dished out]. I thought he felt he had to strip the actors down. A lot of directors do that in a cruel way, skinning them, flaying them. But Warren just wanted the best that I had, so I gave it to him."

Others weren't so amenable, especially since Beatty, ever opaque on set, rarely told the actors precisely what he wanted. According to one source, Maureen Stapleton did more than 80 takes of a scene, her head further slumping onto her shoulders with each re-do. Another day, after another set of multiple takes, she reportedly inquired, "Are you out of your fucking mind?" Beatty just smiled and said, "I may be, darling, but do it again anyway." Says another source, "I saw several actors actually break down and start crying. Jack was almost in tears. In one scene with Diane, I remember him screaming, 'Just tell me what the fuck you want and I'll do it!' Literally, his eyes filled with water from the frustration of not knowing why he was asked to do it again." Says Beatty, "Put it this way: It was a scene of great frustration, and a scene of great emotion. Maybe [Nicholson's reaction] just means I'm a good director! What was it that Katharine Hepburn once said—'Show me a happy set and I'll show you a dull movie.'"

Keaton had mixed feelings about Beatty's methods. "I enjoy that kind of process of discovery by doing things over and over," she says. "But at the same time I didn't exactly feel like I knew what I was doing. It was really Warren's performance, not my performance. Because he worked so hard. He was so thorough, and he was never satisfied, and he pushed me and pushed me, and frankly I felt kind of lost. And maybe that was his intention in some way, for [the character]."

Whatever it was he was looking for, Beatty got some of the best work of their careers from Nicholson and Keaton, helped enormously by Beatty and May's dialogue, alternately passionate, biting, and just plain funny, as when O'Neill, who is in love with Bryant, can't resist telling her—she's acting in an amateur production of one of his plays—"I wish you wouldn't smoke during rehearsals. You don't act as if you're looking for your soul, but for an ashtray."

Gene Hackman's part was small, just two scenes. He had taken the role as a favor to Beatty, whom he was fond of. Hackman was also sensible to the fact that Beatty had kick-started his career by casting him as Buck Barrow in *Bonnie and Clyde*, for which he was nominated for best supporting actor. "It was such a pleasure to work for Warren, even though he did a lot of takes," the actor says. "It was close to 50. He didn't say a lot to me. There's something about somebody who is that tough and perseveres that way that is attractive to an actor that wants to do good work. So I hung in there. And finally it gets you out of the text. You just have these words that are flowing out of you. But all those takes—I was going blind. After Take 5, I'm kind of finished. I had no idea how they would change. I don't think that I

ever verbalized anything to him in terms of my annoyance—I just sucked it up—but he must have known. When he called me to do *Dick Tracy*—the film Beatty made for Disney, in 1990—“I said, ‘I love you, Warren, but I just can’t do it.’”

Assistant editor Billy Scharf, who would later work on *Ishtar* (the 1987 flop starring Beatty and Dustin Hoffman and directed by May), explains Beatty’s working method best: “A lot of people say Warren overshoots. I know that not to be true. Directors who come back with insufficient material are doing a disservice to the opportunity. They get intimidated by stars. Warren is not. In the movie, when Reed wants to leave Russia and go back to America, Zinoviev tells him, ‘You can never come back to this moment in history.’ Warren felt that way when he shot. He believed that that was the time and that was the place, and he had to take advantage of the opportunity to the hilt. He had the resources, and he wanted to use them, because he knew he would never get another chance.”

There was a literal price for the slow pace, as the executives at Paramount were well aware. Recalls Diller, “It was really not possible to budget the movie. We did a kind of estimate [in pre-production], and we were, of course, terribly wrong. I don’t know what we would have done if we knew what the real cost was. I doubt we would have done it, but who knows?”

Says Beatty dryly, “I think there was probably a point when Paramount would have preferred not to be involved.”

As the bills piled up, the relationship between Beatty and Diller deteriorated. At the end of long shooting days, Beatty got on the phone with the Paramount head, and the two men screamed at each other. “Within a week we were a week behind [schedule],” says Diller. “And it just went on from there. They just had all sorts of problems. They had production problems. They had weather problems. They had fatigue problems. They had Warren-and-Diane problems. It was all on the fly, which is a dopey way to make a movie. It was just a mess, and it went on and on. It was one of those rough, rough shoots that made everybody unhappy.”

But Diller was in a bind. “Here’s the dumbassness of that,” he continues. “I should have forced him not to be Warren. But that would have been stupid. That’s his process. That’s how he functions.”

Wholly exasperated, Diller ceased returning Beatty’s phone calls. “I was so angry with him, I thought it was just pointless to talk to him. I wanted to make him feel guilty. I thought that would have some effect. That was naïve.”

As months passed, and the wrap date was forever just over the horizon, mordant jokes about the production were heard on the set, some of which found their way into the “Grabber News,” an occasional broadsheet put out by several crew members. The sheet reported that *The John Reed–Louise Bryant Story*, the film’s working title, was a popular term for Seconal sleeping pills, and suggested alternative titles such as *The Longest Day* and *The 39 Takes*.



Keaton and Beatty in costume. “Making a movie together if you’ve got someone who is even moderately obsessive-compulsive is hell on a relationship,” says Beatty.

Rumors swirled: about the budget, about Beatty’s extravagance, about the script re-writes, about the status of his relationship with Keaton. The set was closed to journalists, which only fed the flames. Beatty’s health suffered. He lost weight and developed a cough. Recalls Pikser, “Warren felt isolated. He used to say to me, ‘You and I are the only two people who give a fuck about what this movie is saying.’ Which is true. You had hundreds of people working on this picture, and for them it was a gig. ‘We did *Agatha* last month and we’re doing this this month.’ And Warren felt like he’s bogged down in the Philippines fighting the Japanese. And nobody else cared if he’s going to win or not.”

Beatty’s relationship with Keaton barely survived the shoot. It is always a

dicey proposition when an actress works with a star or director—both, in this case—with whom she has an offscreen relationship. “It’s like running down a street with a plate of consommé and trying not to spill any,” Beatty says. Moreover, the director admits, his perfectionism only added to the stress: “Making a movie together if you’ve got someone who is even moderately obsessive-compulsive is hell on a relationship.” Keaton appeared in more scenes than any other actor, save Beatty, and many of them were difficult ones, where she had to assay a wide range of feelings, from romantic passion to anger, and deliver several lengthy, complex, emotional speeches. George Plimpton once observed, “Diane almost got broken. I thought [Beatty] was trying to break her into what Louise Bryant had been like with John Reed.” Adds Relph, “It must have been a strain on their relationship, because he was completely obsessive, relentless.”

Says Keaton, “I don’t think we were much of a couple by the end of the movie. But we were never, ever to be taken seriously as one of the great romances. I adored him. I was mad for him. But this movie meant so much to him, it was really the passion of his professional life—it was the most important thing to Warren. Completely, absolutely. I understood that then, and I understand now, and I’m proud to have been part of it.”

Some people who worked on the picture felt that the relationship between Reed and Bryant reflected Beatty and Keaton's offscreen dynamic. In the film, Reed and his circle don't take Bryant entirely seriously; in one scene, he criticizes her for writing an article about the Armory Show—three years after the fact—at a time when the world was going up in flames. In real life, while Beatty was in pre-production on *Reds*, Keaton was putting together a book of photographs of hotel lobbies. “Diane wanted to be serious in certain ways that Warren was ambivalent about,” Pikser says. “To really have been a partner in Diane's quirkiness, the singularity of her pursuit of the obscure and the avant-garde, which to me was a product of a restive and intelligent mind, and also to some degree a compensation for insecurity about her intellectual powers, for him would have been heavy lifting. There was a way in which he wanted to pay obeisance to her intellectual pursuits, but at the same time there was a sense on her part that he didn't really respect or appreciate them. So when Warren says in *Reds*, ‘You're doing a piece on an art exhibition that took place three years ago ... maybe if you took yourself a little more seriously, other people would, too.’ Can you imagine what Warren really thought about her taking photographs of hotel lobbies?”

Keaton says she had an intuitive understanding of Bryant: “I saw her as the everyman of that piece, as somebody who really wanted to be extraordinary, but was probably more ordinary, except for the fact that she was driven. I knew what it was like not to really be an artist. I knew what it felt like to be extremely insecure. I knew what it was like to be envious.” But both she and Beatty emphatically reject the notion that the Reed-Bryant relationship was in some sense analogous to their own. Says Keaton, “It was completely different. I didn't find myself dead in a stairway, drunk. Also I don't think that we're that important, historically, Warren and I. Sorry to say.” For his part, Beatty credits Keaton with much more self-awareness than Bryant possessed. Nor, he says emphatically, was the actress in any way in his shadow. “She had just made one of the great, great movies—*Annie Hall*. She had won the Academy Award. She was very much in demand.”

The simmering tensions in the couple's relationship seem to have boiled over while they were shooting the last scene in the movie: Reed's death, from typhus, in a squalid Moscow hospital with Bryant at his side. Says art director Simon Holland, “It was at the time when he and Diane were about to split. And it was Warren's death scene, and he couldn't sort of concentrate on what was happening—he couldn't even see how Diane was acting.” Beatty did take after take and eventually, according to Holland, he sat up and asked Zelda Barron, the script supervisor, “How was that, Zelda? Was she all right?” Beatty was likely concerned with continuity issues, but some on the set interpreted his question to Barron as an invitation to evaluate Keaton's performance—a breach of thespian protocol. According to Holland, “Diane just went, ‘Warren Beatty, you'll never do that to me again.’ And she walked out. And that was it.” Adds location manager Simon Bosanquet, who was also there, “She went to the airport and left. It was a real exit and a half, a wonderful way to end.”

Of this anecdote, Keaton says, “It does ring a bell,” and “No, I'm not going to talk about that at all.” According to Beatty, it's “completely not true” that he asked Barron to critique Keaton. “I have never asked that question of anyone. It's just not something you do. When we were shooting that scene, there were other matters between me and Diane that really didn't have anything to do with the movie. Nobody knew what was transpiring between me



and Diane. Nobody knows what's going on between me and any of the actors. And often I don't know either."

By the time *Reds* wrapped in the late spring of 1980, editing was already under way in New York. The editorial staff was so big—65 people—it seemed like every editor in New York who could walk and talk had been hired. "We were working six and seven days a week," says editor Craig McKay. "I was screening dailies 16 hours at a clip. Marathons."

The most immediate problem facing the editors was the enormous amount of footage that Beatty had shot. "I was overwhelmed with film," recalls Dede Allen. The party line, she says, was that *Reds* had not exceeded the recent total racked up by *Apocalypse Now*: 700,000 feet of exposed film, about 100 hours' worth. As Allen recalls, "It got to the point where I never discussed [footage] with anybody. That was verboten. [But] I know it was more than 700,000 feet. Are you kidding?" According to Wooll, "We went through over two and a half million feet of film." One source in a position to know claims Beatty shot three million feet—roughly two and a half weeks' worth of screen time—with one million feet actually printed. (The total footage, shipped from London to the U.S. in one big load, is said to have weighed four and a half tons.) Beatty himself can't remember an exact figure, but says, "It's axiomatic that the cheapest thing we have is film. It's the hours that people spend on the day that cost you money. But that's a hell of a lot less time than coming back and adding another shot."

And still Beatty returned for more shooting, scenes that he was not satisfied with as well as new material—which meant that the brutal script work continued on, too, even into late November, for dubbing, with an early-December release date breathing down everyone's neck. Elaine May continued to be an indispensable part of Beatty's team. He felt that she was one of the few people in the inner circle who didn't have her own agenda. At one point, having hurt her ankle, she couldn't walk without a cane. It was late, he wanted her help with a script question, but she wanted to leave. According to an eyewitness, he grabbed her cane while she screamed, "Give me back that cane—I want to get out of here." Beatty had so much confidence in May's judgment that he scrapped an entire sound mix that had taken weeks of work to put together because she didn't think it was as effective as the down-and-dirty temp mix that the sound department had put together months before.

McKay was cutting one of Beatty's scenes, sorting through the takes, when he came across a close-up in which it was clear to him that Beatty was giving his best line reading. But it was a side angle, and there were crow's-feet faintly evident at the corner of his eye. McKay remembered that the actor had once told him, "You've never seen a narcissist until you've met me—I'm the biggest narcissist in Hollywood." McKay said to his assistant, "He's gonna react to that, but that's his best take."

"Yeah, he's gonna want you to take it out, because he doesn't look too good."

"Well, I'm gonna leave it in, because it's his best work as an actor, and we don't know if he's going to spot it or not."

When McKay was ready to show him the sequence, Beatty sat down at the editing bay and folded his arms across his chest as McKay ran the scene for him. According to the editor,

he said, "It's good, it works." Then he paused for a moment and added, "You know that shot of me where I say this, this, and this?"

"Yeah," McKay replied.

"Don't you think it's got a little too much character?"

"Warren, it's your best performance."

"Well, it's good, but it's not quite the tone I want. Find something else." And he walked out of the room.

Beatty had long since patched up his relationship with Diller and Paramount. Around Christmas of 1979, five months into filming, Diller and Eisner had flown to London to see five hours of footage prepared specifically for them. They loved it, and from that point on, the studio was fully behind *Reds*, though some observers wondered if Bluhdorn was hedging his bets when he picked up *Ragtime*, another long historical epic set in vaguely the same time period, from producer Dino De Laurentiis. Oddly, Paramount would release it a mere two weeks before *Reds*.

As Beatty's picture moved toward completion, he screened a near-final cut for the executives, first for Diller and then for Bluhdorn. There was a protocol for these screenings: the guest of honor was never on time. How late he was depended on where he stood in the pecking order. If a screening was scheduled for Beatty himself at eight in the evening, he might show up at any time after that, but never at eight. When he screened the film for Diller, Beatty arrived punctually at eight, but Diller was late. (Nicholson was at that screening, and he'd yell, in his Nicholson voice, "Hey, Dil, hy'a doin', Dil?") At the screening for Bluhdorn in New York, Beatty and Diller were on time, but Bluhdorn was late. (He was accompanied by bodyguards, who locked the doors of the room.) During the intermission, picking food off silver trays, the Austrian mogul said something like, "Varren, yoo haf made a vonderful movie. It is fantastic. I luf you in it, especially, but I haf vun question." "What is that, Mr. Bluhdorn?" "Vill it zell in Indiana?"

Postproduction concluded at the end of November 1981, more than two years after shooting had begun, three years after pre-production commenced. As Sylbert put it, "The shooting time was about 50 weeks. We shot in studios all over Europe. We shot in every fucking country in the world. We came back and filled the studios here in L.A. We were in New York. We were in Washington. You couldn't pay for that picture today."

Beatty declined to do publicity for the movie—he said it should speak for itself—making a difficult marketing job more difficult. The press had already begun sniping about the picture's cost, which may never be known. The official figure Paramount was giving out was \$33.5 million. Beatty says he's not sure, maybe \$31 million, which would be the rough equivalent of \$80 million today. The numbers cited in the press, which weren't really based on anything but one another, gradually crept up into the \$40 millions. The journalist Aaron Latham, in *Rolling Stone*, quoted unnamed Paramount sources who put the final tally near \$50 million but, again, this is a figure best taken with a grain of salt. (For comparison's

sake, the budget of *Heaven's Gate*, then the record holder in non-constant dollars, was estimated at \$44 million.)

It didn't help the movie's profile that the British producer David Puttnam (*Midnight Express*) took it upon himself to launch a crusade against out-of-control filmmaking and began giving interviews chastising Beatty for overspending. Puttnam called *Reds* "lunacy," telling the columnist Marilyn Beck that "Beatty should be spanked in public," that it was "a desperately damaging thing for him to have indulged himself as he has." Worse, it was "despicable" for Paramount to have enabled him. It probably escaped no one's notice, at least in Hollywood, that Puttnam had produced *Chariots of Fire* (reported budget: \$5.5 million), which could be expected to go up against *Reds* at Oscar time.

In the end, Paramount was forgiving about the money spent on *Reds*: the studio had tax-sheltered the picture with Barclay's Bank, and had also put together a currency deal, hedging pounds against dollars, which went Paramount's way. "That was just a piece of birdbrained luck that took any sting from *Reds*," Diller says. "By the time the picture was finished, we were in profit!"

The exhibitors' screenings were predictably discouraging. Theater owners complained about the length and the subject, said things such as "Oh my God, Communism—I know it's a part of our history, but do we have to have a movie about it?" According to Patrick Caddell, the Democratic pollster and consultant, a friend of Beatty's from the McGovern days who was advising on the marketing campaign for *Reds*, Paramount feared a right-wing backlash against the film. But despite a few hostile editorials, nothing much materialized, perhaps because Beatty had headed off conservatives by screening the film—in a remarkable coup—for Ronald Reagan in the White House. Reagan told Beatty he liked it, though the president "wished it had a happy ending."

The reviews, for the most part, were glowing. Vincent Canby called *Reds* "an extraordinary film" in *The New York Times*, "the best romantic adventure since David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*"—high praise indeed. In *Time*, Richard Corliss wrote, "*Reds* is a big, smart movie, vastly ambitious and entertaining, full of belief in Reed and in the ability of a popular audience to respond to him. It combines the majestic sweep of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*—David Lean and Robert Bolt's mature and exhilarating epics—with the rueful comedy and historical fatalism of *Citizen Kane*."

Seen today *Reds* still seems as fresh as the moment it was released—this despite the fact that the lure of the idealism it dramatizes seems even more alien today than it did in 1981, given the current cynicism about politics. Like the Soviet Union itself, John Reed and Louise Bryant may have been doomed, may even have been foolish, but they enlivened their politics with passion and idealism, and in Reed's case, sacrificed his life for his beliefs. The intensity between Beatty and Keaton is tangible on-screen and gives the film its heart. Ultimately, Reed and Bryant are "comrades," the title of Griffiths's first draft, and the word Reed whispers to Bryant on his deathbed. More than just lovers, more than just revolutionaries, they have made political lives, lived their politics, and *Reds* is above all a tribute to that. Beatty's gamble in making a movie with his partner paid off; he didn't spill the consommé. Instead, he did what true *auteurs* must do: make an intensely personal film,

in this case out of big themes and big ideas, out of a chunk of history that in other hands could easily have remained indigestible.

“*Reds* marked the end of something, in the subject matter and the willingness to gamble,” Beatty says, reflecting on his film today. “What moved the late 60s and 70s was politics. *Reds* is a political movie. It begins with politics and it ends with politics. It was in some sense a reverie about that way of thinking in American life, one that went back to 1915.” But it was also, he says, a reverie about the two decades just past, about Beatty’s own generation. “We were those old lefties that were narrating this movie,” he continues. “We, me. *Reds* was a death rattle.”

*Reds* was released on December 4, 1981, in nearly 400 theaters, a medium-size opening. The length precluded it from playing more than once a night, limiting the box office, which was good but not great. On February 11, 1982, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced that the film had gotten 12 Oscar nominations, the most since *A Man for All Seasons*, in 1966, and two more than *Reds*’ nearest competitor in 1982, *On Golden Pond*. The nominations included those for best picture, best director, best actor, best actress, and best adapted screenplay (which was credited to Griffiths and Beatty). Beatty’s four personal nominations, matching a feat he had accomplished with *Heaven Can Wait*, set a record. (Only Orson Welles had also been nominated four times for the same film, but just once, for *Citizen Kane*.)

In the end, *Reds* won only three Oscars: best director, best cinematography, and best supporting actress, for Stapleton. The biggest disappointment was inexplicably losing best picture to Puttnam’s *Chariots of Fire*. It was a nasty twist of fate. As Sylbert put it, Beatty and Puttnam “hated each other. [The loss] broke Warren’s heart, because that was really the first time he’d had a chance to do everything he ever dreamed of.” But Beatty, at this point exhausted by *Reds*, had his Oscar and other consolations. He had screened the picture for Elia Kazan, who directed Beatty in his first picture, *Splendor in the Grass*, in 1961. Kazan had apparently not liked *Shampoo*, and had told Beatty at the time, “You know, Warren, you should have talked to me about that picture before you made it.” But after seeing *Reds* the man who had made *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *On the Waterfront* called Beatty and said, “You really are a good director.”

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