

BIJU

FILM BY ONE

by Myles Ludwig



Inside film producer John Daly's Brentwood home, nestled in the hills above Los Angeles, an autographed photo speaks eloquently of his ability to bring out the best in people. The photo shows Muhammad Ali poised in the center of the ring, a defeated young George Foreman sprawled at his feet on the canvas. The inscription, written boldly in silver ink by The Greatest himself, reads: "John, you told me I could do it. Kindness to others is the rent we pay for our room on earth."

Daly's room on earth seems vast indeed. Extending from steamy Kinsasha in Zaire, where he promoted Ali and Foreman's historic "Rumble in the Jungle," to Beijing's Forbidden City, where the Oscar-winning Best Picture, *The Last Emperor*, was made under Daly's aegis, it also encompasses the torpid jungles of the Philippines that stood in for Vietnam in *Platoon*, yet another Academy-Award-winning Daly project.

For a shrewd businessman, Daly is characterized by his largesse, and Robert Littman, a Hollywood agent, testifies to it. "When I was just starting out, I was representing James Mason on this side of the Atlantic," Littman says. "He had another agent for Europe. His career was languishing and I made a deal for Mason to co-star in one of John's pictures for a \$200,000

fee. It was scheduled to be shot in Mexico, but at the eleventh hour, the location was changed to Spain" (the territory of Mason's European agent). "Mason refused to pay me a commission," says Littman, "but when John heard about it, he sent me a check for \$20,000."

Daly has been producing independent films in the tinsel jungles of Hollywood for decades—long before the "indie" picture became a *cause célèbre*. He was financier and producer/executive producer. Daly was also a major force within a large production company, helping to create such films as *Images* (A Cannes Film

Independent professionals usually work for an organization — but an independent film producer creates the organization.

Festival award-winner), *The Terminator*, *The Falcon and the Snowman*, *Hoosiers*, *At Close Range*, *Chattahoochee*, *Vincent and Theo*, *Tommy*, and Oliver Stone's *Salvador*.

Now, having navigated through a period of professional and personal turbulence ("I've been observing for the past five years"), Daly is back in the ring as a

freelance producer. Operating out of his home with an administrative assistant and a business aide, he's been producing pictures in the United States and Britain.

Making movies is expensive, and expenses are harder

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to meet without the help of a major studio budget. To keep the cost below the \$80-million-a-picture common in Hollywood today, Daly will shoot them on High-Definition Digital Video (HDDV) instead of on film.

Riding along in his sleek Bentley Turbo R, Daly is talking about the difference between making a picture on his own and as part of a big studio bureaucracy. "Studio budgets are bound by guidelines and restrictions that don't necessarily apply to independents," he explains.

"The studios typically have millions tied up in the development of 20 to 30 projects and hope to pick maybe six or eight to do," Daly says. "Only one in 20 of these projects is successful. As an independent, I do the development work and come in with off-the-balance-sheet funding. Since I'm taking all the risk, I try to trim

expenses as much as possible through sales to foreign markets, government subsidies, and cable guarantees. You have to know where all the money comes from. I start with the ticket-takers at the multiplexes and continue on from there," he explains.

"There's the classic story of the young executive who's doing a deal with Dino DeLaurentis, the past grand master of [financing film production]. The executive says, 'No doubt, Mr. DeLaurentis, you'll want a share of net profits.' And DeLaurentis answers, rather imperiously: 'Net is for fishes, young man.'

"Each picture is different," Daly continues. "Each one is like a mini-corporation."

In this case, the producer is an independent professional but he functions as a CEO. He assembles the project team for the picture — actors, director, technicians, and specialists — and oversees every element. The project starts with funding, continues on to production, and then marketing. "It's about turning money into dreams," he says wryly.

Daly talked about what it takes to get a project from conversation to cinema: "First, you have to investigate it thoroughly. A lot of people claim they've got Jack Nicholson in their picture and half the money. You find out 'half the money' is actually your half. And Jack, well, he never heard of the project. That's showbiz. It doesn't phase me."

As described by Daly, there seems to be much greater emphasis on the business of making money rather than the business of making movies. "That's exactly why I want to be doing HDDV," he says. Daly then adds, "I can make creative decisions based on the material, rather than on money exclusively."

It's the material, and the passion of the people involved in shaping it, that most excites Daly.

Daly's workday begins before 7 AM, usually with a phone call to business aide Mark Tolnar. The daily routine involves reading scripts, viewing completed or par-

Q: What was the best project you ever worked on, and why?

A: *Platoon*, because it had such a strong message.

Q: What is the best thing about being an independent professional?

A: Being independent.

Q: What is the worst thing about being an IP?

A: The continual search for funds.

Q: Do you have any advice for other IPs?

A: You'll need a lot of passion.

Q: What is your guiding philosophy?

A: Never give up.

Q: If you could be doing anything other than what you are now, what would it be?

A: Studying, traveling, and reading.

Question & Answer



PHOTOGRAPHY: ZOE CAMPAGNA

tial films, lunching with actors at the Sunset Plaza Café (one of his unofficial offices), and responding to the frequent chirp of his cell phone.

On this particular morning, Daly is focused on the business of making business — he's in deal-seeking mode. Daly arrives at the Bel Air hotel where he's due to meet with an executive from a film distribution company and two principals of a PR firm that was hoping to convince Daly to sign them on.

Daly has brought along his diary and a couple of scripts. As he took his place at the head of the breakfast table, he joked, "I'm in turnaround and making a bit of a comeback." He conferred briefly with the distribution executive and then launched into a full description of his plans.

While Daly may at first appear to be sitting calmly, he is really a man constantly in motion, constantly on-the-go. When Daly speaks about business, he says little and talks quietly. Part of Daly's success stems from his ability to make people around him feel like collaborators. Interestingly, Daly's deal-making has included much more than movies. He's also done quite a bit of work on television shows, soundtrack recordings, pay-per-view concerts, as well as some work on corporate mergers and stock opportunities. Upon signing these multi-million-dollar deals, Daly's stock mantra is "Let's do it; let's get it going." Forget hype — it just doesn't stick to him.

The conversation at this meeting is peppered with the names of well-known celebrities and numerous references to many big-dollar deals already done. As the meeting concludes and Daly leaves the hotel, he makes a point of talking with nearly everyone he interacts

with. He shares tips and anecdotes with the waitstaff as well as the parking attendants. When Daly arrives back at his home, he greets his pets as well: "Hallo birdies, hallo doggies." Daly then retreats to his office, which is piled high with scripts and contracts.

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"Life's a challenge," he remarks. "Keeps you on your toes. The challenge keeps me going. I don't have to keep working, but life would get pretty boring without it. It all comes down to doing what you enjoy doing."

Before long Daly has re-immersed himself in his work. He's caught up in a new script and is spinning an idea for a new movie. As Daly sketches out the plot, he does so with a great deal of enthusiasm; he has clearly switched off his understated deal-making persona. "Fantastic! C'mon, we'll write it; we'll get it going!" he says. The man exudes charisma. He's at once persistent and inspirational.

Next stop is Century City. L.A.'s famous traffic jams abound and we proceed at a crawl along a traffic-choked freeway. Daly makes a quick stop along the way to sign some documents before continuing along to have lunch with a foreign investor. And then, another meeting — this time in the lounge of the same hotel he had lunch at. Throughout the day, Daly has been an attentive and gracious host. He treats his business associates like guests.

As Daly prepares for yet another business meeting at 5 PM, he shows no signs of fatigue. In fact, he appears totally energized. As he leaves the hotel, it's hard not to notice the spring in his step. **1099**

IP STATS

Field: Media	Typical working hours: 16 hours per day
Specialty: Film production	Worst wage-slave job you ever had: Steward in the Merchant Navy
Hours per week: 80-90	