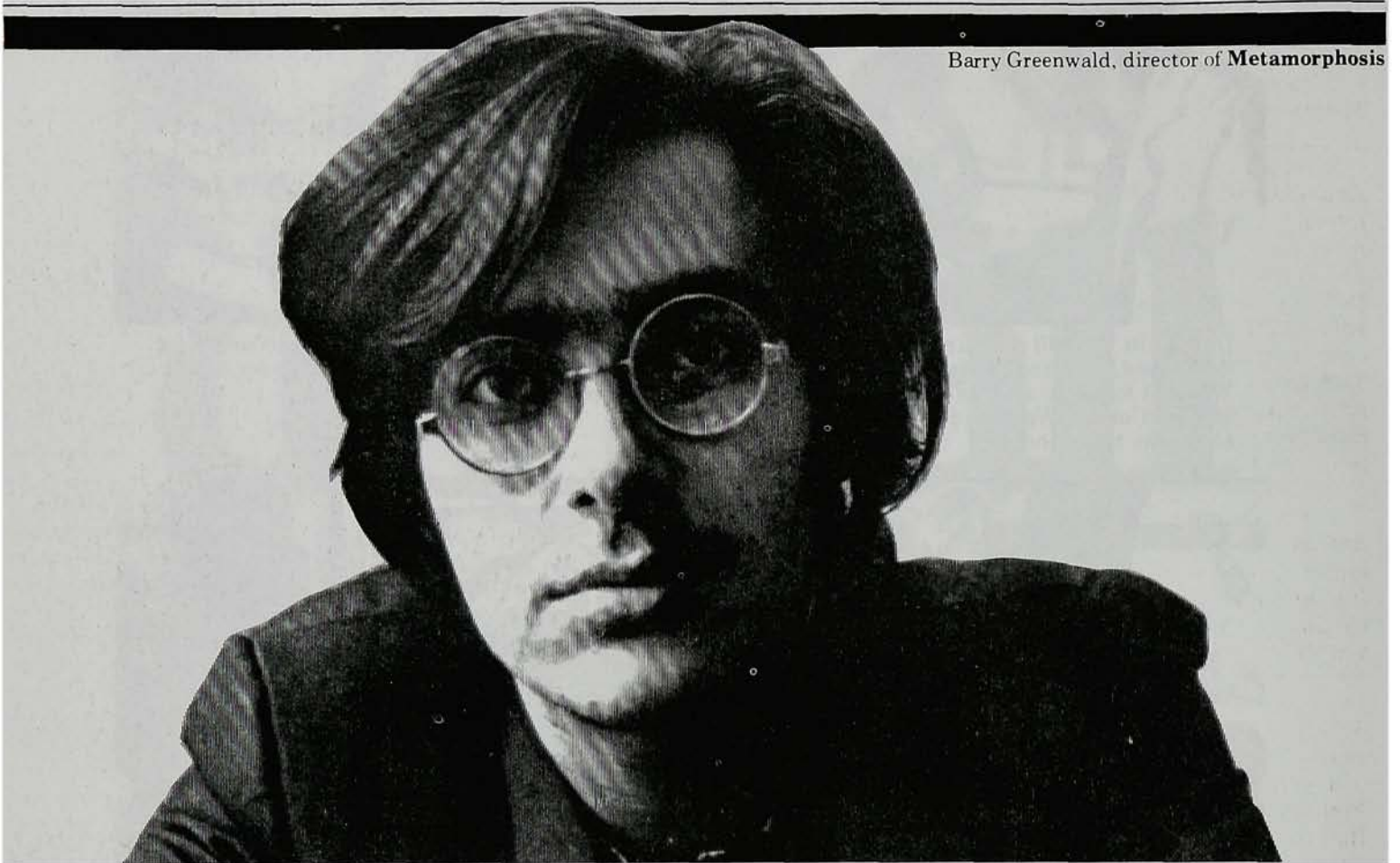


cannes (3) going up

by Natalie Edwards

Barry Greenwald, director of *Metamorphosis*



At 22 Barry Greenwald honors his native land with a *Palme d'Or* from the International Film Festival in Cannes for his short film *Metamorphosis*.

Born in Montreal of immigrant parents, his mother a Russian, his father a German Jew, Barry was brought up in Toronto and attended a number of North York schools. He acquired his first enthusiasm for film under the expert guidance of a transplanted Czech working for the North York Board of Education instructing a film course. Barry was 16.

Miloslav Kubik had a documentary film studio in Bratislava, but was now running a 16 mm summer film course. He took an interest in me, and pushed me pretty hard, and I think I developed some sort of basic discipline, some kind of work habits. I directed my first few films. At first it was an interest but it wasn't anything I was going to pursue, but by the time I finished high school it seemed natural to me that I was going to go into a film course. Another Czech, Vasek Taborsky, who was a friend of Milo's, was at Conestoga, so that's why I went there.

What do you think of Conestoga as a film school? Have you had a chance to compare it with others?

It's really good because someone made a bureaucratic mistake and they got 10 times more equipment than any other school. It was one of the first community colleges to open, and Davis was the Minister of Education, so as a re-

sult it had a lot of equipment, and both Vasek And Frank Valert, another chap, were there. I was told they were excellent people; they both studied at Famu, a Czech film school. Conestoga was a good school in that you could do things there, but like anything else, it's so difficult to teach a bunch of egocentric 18-year-old kids how to do things.

There was Frank and there was Vasek and Richard Clark, who was supposed to teach us film history. He was really nice; he just showed movies. We had movies every Tuesday afternoon, we saw all the big films for three years, and they never repeated the program, and there was no lecture, no speeches or anything. And that was a lot of fun.

Well, Vasek became really disappointed, I think, because he had this impression he was coming to this new country with a potentially fantastic film industry, and here were these young people he was going to mold in the Czech tradition of film school. And it didn't work out. Too naive an impression - so he left because of money problems, because they were cutting money out of the program. There were politics. Radio and television were getting more money. So he went to Algonquin College.

Frank Valert was very disappointed also. You see, Frank was actually an assistant professor in Prague, and he's shot a whole pile of films. So he's gone to Los Angeles, and is now at UCLA.

You were lucky...

We were all lucky. That was the last year we had those people. There were about 30 in the first year in the class, but by the time we graduated there were about 10 of us and

only a few finished films. Like Neil Warren, Andrew Ruhl, whose film **Pedestrians** was a finalist at Cannes last year, Ken Illass, Rob Wallace, and myself.

How are they all getting on?

Well, Rob's at Crawley's now, Andrew's working on a Council grant, of course, and Neil is continuing with his plasticene. The people who got serious about it did really well.

You've made six films now?

Yes. I made three short films in high school, and three, including **Metamorphosis**, while I was at Conestoga... well, at Conestoga, everyone worked on everyone else's films. There was a lot of opportunity to try everything.

Barry's first three short films are **Etude**, **Tangents** and **Agamemnon the Lover** made in 1970 and 1971 under the tutelage of Miloslav Kubik. He describes **Etude** as a five-minute film about a couple going to the airport, whom we watch getting ready to leave. Only at the end do we realize they are parting, and the man is left behind. North York entered all the films made in its program in various festivals, and **Etude** was a finalist at Cinestud in Amsterdam. **Tangents** was a disaster, says Barry, and involved a hitch-hiker who ends up exactly where he started after taking rides with four diverse types, a businessman, a girl, a priest and a farmer. It took third prize at a competition York University organized for high school student films.

As for **Agamemnon the Lover**, it was 5½ minutes of limited animation illustrating the problems of a man who is an expert on love being exploited by those who want his secret. It didn't work, was absurd in its view of love, and the comedy wasn't that good, says Barry. Technically, however, it was interesting.

What's happened to Miloslav Kubik? And the summer course?

It carried on. He stayed. He's still there at the North York Board of Education. He's the camera person there. But their program was cut because they didn't have the money for it. They once had an actual screen education consultant, so now they have all this equipment, but he's just doing small films now. But he does that set of Animate Canada Puppet Films you might have heard of – a whole series of them, at least 100.

The thing with Milo was – I was 16 at the time – I don't know, it almost turned into a kind of friendship and I spent a lot of time sitting down and talking, skipping classes, and just going 'cause I liked it so much...

Sounds like a master-apprentice relationship...

How would you judge the Czech influence on you, then? How do you like Czech films?

Oh, I love them. What these people gave me, especially Miloslav, is a very human attitude towards film, very much in the Czech tradition. Those were the kind of films that I was nuts about.

It's sort of obvious – your film is very Czech...

I like black humour, too. I went to Czechoslovakia, and I saw some of those films. It was a great trip.

When did you go?

I went in 1973 to the actual Eastern bloc. I went to Poland, Czechoslovakia, all the countries. It's so great for a westerner to go there. There's no one else – no tourists, except Russians wearing polka-dot shirts and striped pants – and people really like to meet you, and it's very warm, very... ten years slower than it is here. The arts there are sort of state-supported, and Prague is amazing – there's just so much happening!

I was considering going to the school there because it seemed a natural step after I finished. I talked to the people there, and I'd been accepted, but as a matter of fact I'd have had to pay a lot of money and there's the problem of a whole other culture. So what are you going to do – spend five years in Czechoslovakia and that whole thing and come out...? You'd be spaced out completely. Culturally, it's not my world, and I would have been in trouble because I get the impression that they do resent westerners.

So, if you didn't train there, still you think you'd like to do more training?

I'd like... I have the idea of a film academy that is really excellent – you know, fantastic professors who push you like crazy and really force you to work.

Where do you think you're going to find that?

Oh, it doesn't exist.

*Now, about **Metamorphosis**, tell me the physical things. How long is it, how much did it cost?*

It's 10 min. 33 sec. About \$1000 (film stock, lab work, sound mix) and took approximately 4 months to edit.

And Bob Green?

Bob Green is a resident Galt artist and a drummer in a jazz band. He's a completely kooky flipped-out guy with a fantastic sense of black humour, who won't talk to me any more after that... because the experience of having to go to Toronto every Sunday night to shoot between midnight and 7 in the morning with a 19 or 20-year-old punk, as he used to call me, was stupid.

And he had to take his clothes off – you know, click click click, single frame, make a mistake and you have to go back to the top. And, you know, I could have done it a lot simpler; I could have had just one shot, and then intercut. But I wanted to maintain perfect continuity, and I'm meticulous, 'cause I'm a nut.

If you watch that film you'll see that everything's perfect, there are no mistakes as far as continuity – but I drove him crazy.

How long did it take to shoot?

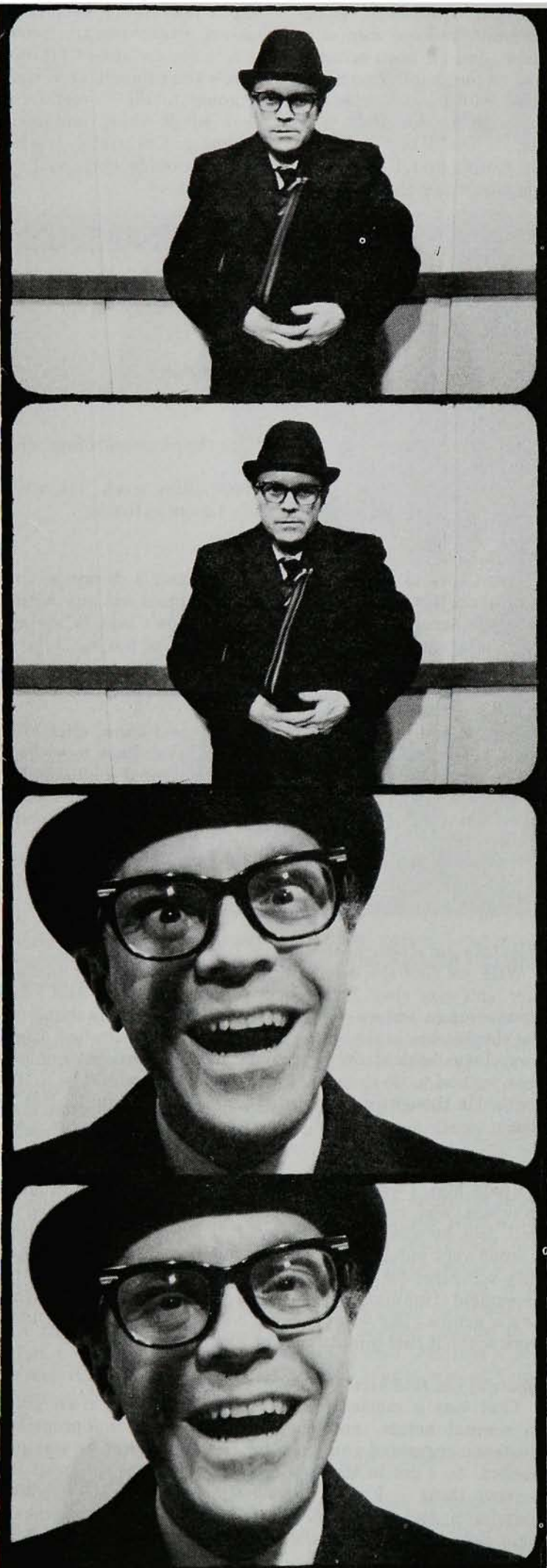
Well, we shot the whole film in Waterloo. Getting an elevator isn't very easy. So we went to the university. And I had a cameraman and we shot the whole thing. Then we found out the shutter was in the wrong position. It had all flashed. Right away I was back at the beginning, and I had to convince him that we had to do it again. And I told him it would be in Toronto. He thought we were idiots and wouldn't do it. But he did.

Did you pay him?

I paid him. I was still dabbling in oils, so I paid him off in canvases, and gave him practically everything I owned as well. But he wasn't very happy. It was an ugly thing, and I learned very much about what people will and won't do when they volunteer for a project. This is the whole thing with independent filmmakers. And he's beautiful, he's exquisite, he's a genius. The way he came off in that film! It wouldn't work without that quality that he has.

How did you find him?

That was a matter of just asking friends. I tried going to normal actors, and they all were very inappropriate. Someone suggested this man for the story, that he was just perfect. So I got in touch with him. That was the most important thing – I spent a long time, like months, before I found him, and when I found him I knew instantly he was the right person. But that's the way it should be. I had that intuition.



He went along?

Yes, he thought it sounded interesting. It appealed to his sense of absurdity. And for his double, we went to a lot of old folks' homes. We tried makeup and it looked ludicrous.

What about the ending, the choral background?

Well, there were various different endings.

Such as?

Well, you could have a radio newscast, which would be terrible. You could have a clock ticking, which is so goddam cliché. I thought the Gregorian chant was much better, but it was some kind of open hall or space I wanted to sense.

And then – well, the thing was, how do you top off what has happened? In one you see him pushing a button that says Infinity. Or you see the elevator going through the ceiling and into orbit, or hear a newscast about this strange old man being unidentified – Vasek's pet idea; he wouldn't talk to me for about 2 weeks: "You don't like my idea? I won't talk to you."

You have to be pretty strong-minded?

Everyone had their impression. I didn't know what to do. The ending is what disappoints me...

That's not good enough. And another weakness is the beginning of the film. A lot of people are still confused. The pacing is a little off. It's very natural, very slow, and they watch it and they say, "Oh, not another student film about a guy with a boring life," or something like that. I tried very very hard with the sound to create something, but it never happens – no one knows how to play it right. The thing builds up to a crescendo, and the sound track is mixed like that, but for some reason they play it way too loud, so that by the time it gets to the high level it distorts it, and it sounds so low, it doesn't have the proper significance. I very carefully increased it in certain steps, till he gets to the Television stage, and there's a barrage of sounds – which builds up the headache... it doesn't quite work.

Where did you find the lady who meets the elevator each day?

That's Ali Kubik, that's Miloslav's wife. She's been an opera singer, and she's just a fantastic woman, she works really hard on those puppet films...

We shot at York. They were very cooperative, but they didn't want their name mentioned, they said, because they didn't know what I was doing. All the workmen there, all the cleaning people, they loved it, they just loved to watch all these nuts with all the equipment and everything.

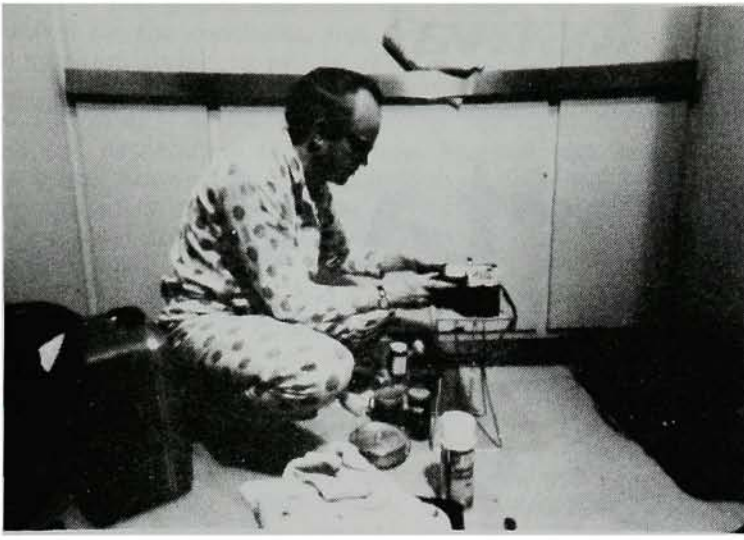
So how long did it take to shoot?

Well, actually I think over about 10 weekends. That was the second time. The first time it was easier because they let us have the elevator for two weekends complete. Actually the shooting was a pain in the ass, but when you think about it now, it was all for the best.

What about using colour, or will you continue to work in black and white?

Oh, black and white – it's exquisite. But no one's going to buy it – well, TV (CBC) in Montreal picked it up. The print's available.

It's funny, Famous was so negative about **Metamorphosis**, even after gave me that \$100 cash award. They wouldn't even let it in the door. My whole luck was struck with Rock Demers of Faroun films. After Rock said hello, he said "Come to Montreal." I've heard some great stories about Rock – he's always picking up films that he loves but he can't sell. And so I didn't know what his intentions were. But he was really completely surprised, you know, at certain things that have happened. I guess he was in Cannes to try to sell the film. Well, Gerald Pratley playing it at Stratford really helped me out.



Cooking breakfast on the way down in *Metamorphosis*

How did you approach Gerald?

Vasek knows Gerald. He said well, look, you have these programs and here are two or three Conestoga shorts, do you want to play them? The shorts played and were well received.

I was hurt by the thing at the Student Film Festival. But that was a good hurt.

Because they only gave you a general award?

The worst thing was the film played there and the audience cracked up. It was a student audience, people were drunk, loud, laughing... and people came up to me saying "Oh, it's great, you're going to win..." So, I didn't expect to win at first, but, I thought here I'm going to get something in a major category, and then all those nutty things happened, and there was a bit of a fiasco, and it got disorganized. But it hurt me, because it was my peer group and that was important. It shattered me, but that was good.

I went to the Film Board because I wanted to get on the director's course, to work with Vladimir Valenta, another Czech - my God, what could be more fantastic? - and I went there and saw Roman Kroiter, and he looked at my film and he said, "It's garbage - nothing worthwhile. It's self-indulgent." He said, "That film doesn't convince me you have any ability to deal with anything. Show me something else." I had some other films that I felt were even more human, like my first film, very simple, very human, and he said that was just as bad and I should go to the theatre - and this all affected me, and I thought about it and I said, he's right. This short film has just one guy in it, there's no dialogue, there's no characterization, there's no interaction. Yes, yes. Too bad he doesn't like me enough to give me a chance.

Milo did that all the time. He's never let anything go to my head. When I was younger I was a little more egocentric and he cut me down all the time.

That does me good. After the Film Board I came back, and Rock told me it was doing well, and then at Yorkton, it picked up an award.

What has it got so far? Shown at Stratford, best sound editing at CFA, and at Yorkton...?

Best film award at Yorkton. And it was selected for Filmex...

And now Cannes.

And this is a year and a half after the film's finished and everything, and it's all past... it's so far away. I mean it's good it happened now...

How did it get to Cannes?

Rock Demers entered it. Serge Losique actually had it blown up to 35 mm.

*Your inspiration for **Metamorphosis** came partly from Vasek's description of a short story he once read?*

Yes, he told it to me and I liked it.

One of the benefits of that film at Cannes was, of course, that you didn't have to have the language to understand it.

That's one thing I don't like either - why do I need to have titles in the film? Why does the film need to have words on the screen? Those dates... I wanted to show the progression of time, and I wanted it to be very clear so people wouldn't think he did this all in a week. I don't know how important that is. But I don't think films need words on the screen. I should have challenged myself and found another way to make the transitions. So I'm not happy with that. And of course I'm not happy with the title at all. I mean now I call it **Osmosis**.

Is there anything else you'd do differently if you were doing it over again?

I did the best I could. I worked really hard. I was lucky they had Steenbeck machines, because I couldn't have cut the stuff on a Moviola. I had to use a Steenbeck. There's a lot of tracks in the film; very ambitious sound. And I learned that from Milo - how to cut sound. Everything has to be very precise, very professional. And everyone was amazed at the very professional way in which the film was put together.

We made complete charts. Most people coming down to the studio have charts practically made on toilet paper, but I consider it to be very important because I have so much, maybe too much, respect for the so-called professionals you deal with. I found in fact that many of them barely have a clue. And I was brought up in the tradition of Czech films and how they make them. I had to have very definite organization, very much into cleanliness when you're handling your material, you know. Everything's clean. And in the end it's very important.

How do you live?

I drive a cab a couple of days a week. It's not a bad job, you know. Because you can work a few days, and you can make good bucks, if you work pretty hard at it. The hours can get pretty long. There's a whole street scene, you know, and that's kind of fun.

What I like about these people (his cab company) is when I told them what happened in Cannes, they wouldn't believe me. I told my boss, and he said "Anyone who drives a cab doesn't do things like that. Why would you want to fool me? Do you think I'm stupid or something?" Then he said, "What's the name of this film anyway?" and I said **Metamorphosis**, and he said, "**Metawhosafis??**" □