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**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LIFE OF THE SCREENWRITER,
 HENRY FRANK
 A Play in One Act**

Characters (in order of appearance):

LECTURER

EDDIE (can double as Skippy Frelinghuysen/Counsel/Comm Affairs Rep/Shopowner)

HILDA (can double as Hedda Hopper/Louella Parsons/Christie's Executive

HENRY FRANK (can double as Walter Winchell)

HEDDA HOPPER

WALTER WINCHELL

LOUELLA PARSONS

SKIPPY FRELINGHUYSEN COUNSEL

CHRISTIE'S EXECUTIVE

COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REPRESENTATIVE

SHOPOWNER

IMPORTANT NOTE: although there are 12 characters, the only role that cannot be doubled is the LECTURER, and the play could be easily performed by a total of three male actors and one female actor)

Scenic, design, and costume requirements: The stage is bare with the exception of some simple furniture (a lectern, a table, some chairs,), there are some props (a wheelchair—old-fashioned if possible-- silver bullets; books, files, scripts; bullhorn; portable tombstone); and period costuming.

NOTE: A more elaborate version of the play includes a series of screens and scrims downstage, for multi-media projection. Such a production would probably require a far greater budget than is likely to be available and those requirements are not included in this script.).

Estimated running time: 35-40 minutes

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LIFE OF THE SCREENWRITER,
HENRY FRANK**

(A lectern with a lamp downstage left. The area at stage left should seem confined, like a small studio or the front of a lecture hall. The scene toward stage right, though, should seem to have no limits, an area of the imagination, where the characters populating the LECTURER's memories will emerge. It is empty except for a large table/desk/counter, with drawers, at midstage. A chair sits behind it, perhaps another at its side. LECTURER enters from stage left, walking purposefully toward the lectern. He's a middle-aged to elderly gentleman, dressed informally. He carries several books and paper files, all of which he places on the lectern. He clicks on the lamp, and the lights in the theatre dim.

LECTURER

Thank you all for coming to hear the results of my investigation into the life of the great screenwriter Henry Frank. Most of you, I'm guessing, have probably never heard of Henry Frank, but I'm sure many of you have seen one or two of his films without realizing it, perhaps early in the morning just after the Tonight Show, or on Turner Classic Movies, or even at a revival house somewhere. Recently, however, there's been renewed interest in his work. Two of his films were screened at the "Noir Thirties" retrospective in 2003 at the Cinéma des Deux Mondes on the rue du Montparnasse, and if you were lucky enough to be in Berlin last summer, you could have seen the first showing since 1943 of his avant-garde swashbuckler, *Pirates of the Lost Seas*, at the 2005 Internationales Festival für vergessenes Lichtspielkunst. My own interest goes back a long way, all the way back to 1976 and my first publication as a film critic in a special issue of the *Kansas Quarterly* devoted to American Film. The essay, "The Screenwriter as Auteur: The Case of Henry Frank," was drawn from the second chapter of my Master's thesis, and here's a short extract from its conclusion.

(LECTURER opens a copy of a journal and begins to read from it.)

LECTURER

"But Henry Frank was one of the first to depict the passion and hunger smoldering beneath the surface of an economically ravaged nation. In script after script -- *Enemy of the People* (1932), *Boulevard Baby* (1934), *Spawn of the Bowery* (1936), *By Night They Walk* (1938) -- he portrayed

the surge and the will that eventually was to resuscitate a moribund American dream, revealing in the process a direction toward a constructive and cohesive end, a common goal."

(LECTURER closes the review.)

LECTURER

Still holds up pretty well, don't you think? And was I ever surprised a couple of months later, to find a letter from Henry Frank himself in my mailbox. It was as if I'd opened the door to see Herman J. Mankiewicz or Ben Hecht standing right there on my threshold. I had no idea then that Henry Frank was even still alive. I had done considerable research on him for my Masters Thesis, but I could find very little on his personal life, particularly after he'd dropped from sight in 1943 following the spectacular failure of *Pirates of the Lost Seas*. Anyway, here's that very same letter.

(LECTURER displays a copy of the letter—
handwritten in blocky script in heavy black ink, with
the word "Chickenshit" perhaps readable in the front
rows.)

LECTURER

Let me read it to you. "Dear Sir. Chickenshit. Read your piece and it's a bunch of chickenshit. And what's all this crap about (quote) optimism in the face of despair, a strain evident even in the grim mise-en-scene of *Enemy of the People*? (unquote) . . ."

(Spot on HENRY FRANK, sitting at the table/desk,
stage right, as he reads from the letter he is writing.)

FRANK

"The only reason *Enemy's* got half-a happy ending is because the bastard's tacked it on without me even knowing about it! It was the Depression, don't you know, and they didn't want all the customers going home feeling depressed."

(The LECTURER looks up from the letter and
addresses the audience.)

LECTURER

Do you remember that ending of *Enemy of the People*? Eddie, the antihero, finds religion just before being gunned down by the Bertolli mob, and then his girl, Hilda, falls into the arms of Eddie's brother, the preacher. He comforts her. They kiss. Fade out.

FRANK

(still writing). "But the real finale wasn't in a church, you see, not the way I wrote it. It was in a warehouse on the docks, since on the docks you could use the fog machines and then the cheap sets wouldn't look so phony!"

(Lights down on HENRY FRANK as he places the letter with several sheets of other paper into an envelope, and exits.)

LECTURER

And as a close to his letter, he attached the final manuscript page, the original ending of his first screenplay, *Enemy of the People*. Here's a copy of it, the real ending to *Enemy of the People*. (The LECTURER displays a copy of the last few pages of a screenplay.)

LECTURER

I'll read it to you: "The warehouse," he writes. "Eddie and Hilda's final refuge. The fog coming in under doors and windows, as if on little cat feet. . . ." Nice touch there, don't you think?

(Fog begins to seep from behind the scenes downstage right.as if on little cat feet.)

LECTURER

Close up on Eddie, desperation in his eyes . . .

(EDDIE enters, desperation in his eyes. He's followed by HILDA who, catching up to him, clings to his arms. EDDIE appears in a shirt, open at the collar, and baggy pants, guns in both hands. HILDA's dressed in a cheap simple dress and cloche hat. Like EDDIE's clothes, hers are also in black, white, and gray, and throughout the scene the lighting of this sequence, if possible, should give it the grainy appearance of a black-andwhite early talkie.)

EDDIE

Go on, Hilda, lam outta here! Get out!

HILDA

No, Eddie. I can't. You've gotta give yourself up. They'll kill you, Eddie, and I know you had nothing to do with it!

EDDIE

Get out! If you don't, I'll plug you myself, and I never liked pluggin' dames!

HILDA

But Eddie. . . .

EDDIE

Get out, Hilda! Get out!

HILDA

Ok, Eddie. You're still the boss.

LECTURER

"Hilda turns around for one last look.

HILDA

See you around. . . tough guy.

LECTURER

"Hilda disappears into the fog."

(HILDA exits into the fog.)

LECTURER

"Mallock's voice, off camera, through a bullhorn . . ."

(LECTURER removes a bullhorn from beneath the lectern. If a bullhorn is unavailable, MALLOCK can also be an offstage voice.)

(LECTURER, through the bullhorn) Hold your fire, boys. It's a woman!

LECTURER

(returns to the script). "Searchlights sweeping back and forth . . . Again, Mallock, through a bullhorn."

(LECTURER, through the bullhorn)

Come on out, Eddie! We've got all the doors and windows covered! Give it up, Eddie! You're through!

EDDIE

Oh yeah? That's what you think, Mallock! Why don't you come on in and get me!

(LECTURER returns bullhorn to beneath the lectern and again reads from the script.)

LECTURER

“Mallock nods to one of his boys. Glass shattering. Tear gas rising. The open door of the warehouse, framed from the inside. Beams of light cutting through fog and gas. Coughs. Eddie staggering into the light, rods in both hands, arms dangling, body lit up like a halo. Eddie disappears into the smoke and fog. . . .”

(EDDIE exits.)

LECTURER

“Shots, as if from a tommy gun.”

(Shots as if from a tommy gun.)

LECTURER

A woman screams. . . .”

HILDA (O.S.)

Eddie! No!

LECTURER

“Fade out.” There was a postscript to the letter:

FRANK (O.S.)

"If you want the real goods on me and my films, why don't you come around and see me sometime. I can be had, you know."

LECTURER

The return address -- a street in Ocean Park, California -- was under the name of "Henry Franklin." The next month, September 1977, I went out to see him. I hoped eventually to write a long biographical exegesis for *Cahiers du Cinéma* or something of that sort, but it didn't work out.

(The LECTURER opens his notebook, and he will begin to read from it.)

LECTURER

I still have my notes from the interview, though, right here.

(As the LECTURER reads, HENRY FRANK enters from upstage. He rolls out a wheelchair, perhaps an old-fashioned one, and places it in proximity to the table/desk, facing the audience. FRANK is an elderly man, dressed casually but romantically, perhaps with a scarf wrapped rakishly around his neck.)

LECTURER

“Date: September 16, 1977. Place: Ocean Beach, California. Henry Frank lives in a modest bungalow a few blocks from the ocean. He’s a tall man, and with his high cheekbones, prominent nose, and cruel Tartar eyes, he reminds me of a darker, thinner version of John Wayne. He leads me into a spacious living room. Scattered about are odd pieces of furniture that seemed to have been retrieved from rummage sales -- an ancient wheelchair, a heavy oaken desk covered by a blanket embroidered with family crests, a small upright piano on wheels, a stuffed wire-haired terrier, bizarre pieces of bric-a-brac inside the numerous niches carved into the thick adobe-like walls. He offers me a seat on the wheelchair.”

(FRANK silently offers the LECTURER a seat in the wheelchair. The LECTURER gathers his notebook together with a pencil, and crosses over to stage right, sitting down in the chair and continuing his interview.)

LECTURER

“He then settles down across from me in the chair next to the heavy desk, beneath one of the niches containing the statuette of a large black bird. I begin provocatively.”

(LECTURER displays FRANK’s letter.)

LECTURER

“Chickenshit?”

FRANK

Yeah, sorry about that. But all that analytical stuff. . . . Look, all I know is they expected me to put asses in the seats. I had the common touch, you see, could speak the language of the paying customers, and that’s all that mattered.

LECTURER

(recollecting from his article). "The brash, colloquial argot of the streets, as endemic to the city as asphalt and skyscrapers."

FRANK

Yeah, something like that. You know, they assigned me rewrites, too, juicing up a script to give it crackle and snap, making it come alive. They even brought me in on the first version of *The Great Gatsby* because the lead was supposed to be a rumrunner. But I couldn't deal with what's-his-name. Fitzgerald. Goddamn drunk. I told him the name was Henry, but he kept calling me Hank. Hank Frank. He thought it was funny, broke him up every time. We didn't get along. But most of the tough guys loved my stuff. Cagney, Bogart, Stanwyck, Barton Maclane. American voices speaking to an American public. Down-to-earth, the old Warner's style. None of that prestige crap. You know, English accents and Paul Muni. I only knew what the Joe on the streets was saying, thinking. Of course, that was easy for me, since that's where I came from. The streets.

LECTURER

(to the audience). He tells me that he's an American, to use his own words, Chicagoborn, that he never knew who his father was, and his mother died when he was in his early teens.

FRANK

From then on, the streets brought me up. There's an education for you. In and out of reform schools, lifting Hershey bars from five-and-dimes, jackrolling drunks, hustling in poolhalls, dives, blind pigs. Dope fiends nodding on the corner, the cop on his beat, the whore in the window, the smell of piss and garbage, and a million kids, running and squalling everywhere, clawing and scratching to get out.

LECTURER

(to the audience). With the exception of having been born in Chicago, all of this, of course, was a lie. Henry's father was an accountant, I later discovered, and his mother lived into her sixties. He attended the University of Illinois, leaving after three years without his degree. But rather than give me a valid account of his past, he seemed to be composing a cinematic treatment for my benefit, a script for Warner Bros., featuring Humphrey Bogart and the Dead End Kids. Only Pat O'Brien as the sympathetic priest was left out.

FRANK

From the penny-ante graft, I graduated into the big time, and before I turned twenty, I was on Dion O'Bannion's payroll, delivering rot-gut hootch and keeping the distributors honest. Now, don't get me wrong. I might've rearranged a few faces in my day but I never even packed a rod. But I knew all the guys what did. All of them, real swells. Patent leather shoes, spats with silver buttons, pink satin shirts, gold cuff links as big as eggs, and those snap-brimmed Panamas and low-hanging fedoras. Christ, we had style in those days. And O'Bannion. Never stepped outside without a fresh bloom in his lapel. I remember when the guineas gunned him down in his flower shop on State Street just across from Holy Name. Blood and carnations all over the joint. Say, that'd make a swell title for a screenplay. Blood and Carnations! Of course, with O'Bannion pumped full of lead, it got plenty hot for the rest of us there on the North Side, so I hopped a freight and headed west.

LECTURER

(to the audience). I later could find nothing on Henry from the time he left Chicago to his arrival in Hollywood, and much of what he told me about his travels could very well have been true. After all, his films reveal a considerable familiarity with the life of the average working man during those years.

FRANK

Short-order cook in Fort Madison. Peddled Bibles door-to-door. Hauled heavy equipment from the Mississippi to the Pacific Coast. Wild-catter in East Texas and range-rider in Wyoming. But times were getting tougher every year. You couldn't find work just down the road anymore, and when the money ran out, I wound up picking peaches in California, apples in Washington state.

LECTURER

(to FRANK). And then you turned to writing.

FRANK

Sort of. I was shacking up in this Hooverville on the coast, and since I didn't have nothing better to do, I took to reading the pulps that were lying around. It wasn't long before I figured I could do better than any of those hacks, and I sold my first story right off to *Broncobuster*, and wouldn't you know, the son-of-a-bitch editor sold it to the movies. I didn't get a cent, just my penny-and a half-a-line, since I didn't keep the movie rights. Didn't even know what the hell they were. You had to be careful those days, everyone was out to skin you. So I figured maybe I could get some of that movie dough myself. Nobody had enough to eat, but everybody was going to the movies back then, and I penned my first screenplay on a boxcar heading south to L.A. *Bloody Beer*. The first producer who saw it optioned me then and there, and I hardly had to change a word, except for the ending, which I didn't write, and the title. You could have plenty of blood on the screen in those days, but never in a title."

LECTURER

So it became *Enemy of the People*.

FRANK

Right.

LECTURER

And the rest is cinematic history--until 1943 when you left Hollywood and . . .

FRANK

I never left Hollywood.

LECTURER

But *Pirates of the Lost Seas* was your last screenplay.

FRANK

(smiling, shaking his head). Some night when you can't sleep, real late, when the Monogram and Republic potboilers are screened on TV, you keep your eyes peeled for "Additional Dialogue by Franklin Henry." That's me. Leo Gorcey and the Bowery Boys loved my stuff.

LECTURER

But no more originals.

FRANK

Nothing I could sell. But now I'm onto something else. Something big. Really big . . . Richard Speck.

LECTURER

Richard Speck? The guy who murdered all those nurses back in the 60s?

FRANK

The Life and Times of.

LECTURER

A docudrama?

FRANK

Docudrama? Shit! Listen to this.

(FRANK stands up and walks behind the desk. He'll remove a script from one of its drawers, and begins to read from it.)

FRANK

How's this for a grabber of an opening: Pan across an empty apartment, floor-level. Broken glass on the carpet. On the TV screen, a test pattern flickering. A laundry hamper filled with clean, folded nurses' linen. A woman crawls out from beneath a bed. The camera tracks her out to the balcony. She stands up slowly, leaning against the rail, and then screams into the dawn, 'They're dead! All my friends are dead!' The score takes over. Max Steiner, for sure. By God, this'll be no low-budget, hand-held camera job. It'll be the real goods.

LECTURER

Max Steiner? Is he still alive?

FRANK

(ignoring the comment). A man running down the alleyway, leaping over trashcans, and then over a fence wired like a cage, and then into the distance, gone. They never find another trace of him, except for his bloody footprints in the alley.

LECTURER

But they caught him. They caught Richard Speck.

FRANK

Who the hell cares? Didn't I tell you this ain't no documentary! In my scenario, he's far from through. A dark, empty street. Midnight. A shadow unscrews the light bulb in the foyer of an apartment house. The shadow leans against the wall, picking its fingernails with something long and sharp. Speck.

(The LECTURER has also arisen by now, and disengages himself somewhat from FRANK, speaking again to the audience.)

LECTURER

Scene after scene, Henry describes images of mayhem and murder, some direct from the morning paper, illuminated with a garish light, others fantastic, heightened, projected onto an enormous screen.

FRANK

High in the Western mountains. Rocks, a clear blue sky, a soft wind. A village square, a church at one end, its spires casting long shadows across a dusty street. Someone crosses the street as if in a dream. Suddenly, he grabs his throat. Blood seeps through his fingers. A long, loud cry, so piercing you've got to press your hands against your ears to keep out the pain. He falls, twitching in the dust. Cut back to Speck in the rocks. He sights his rifle. The soft rasp of the wind.

LECTURER

The Western motif seems to have stimulated Henry's imagination.

FRANK

Speck touring Oklahoma, Missouri, sticking up banks and gas stations along the way. Tommy guns knocking out bank tellers and plate glass windows. Sheriffs with big bellies and Sam Browne belts. Packards with running boards. Maybe banjo music in the background.

LECTURER

(again engaging FRANK). That's all been done before.

FRANK

FRANK

So what? Who cares? What the hell you think this business is all about, anyway?

LECTURER

It's certainly not about all that killing.

That's where you're wrong, sonny boy. It's all about the killing. That's what the paying customers like most of all. Seeing the other guy get it. You see, it makes them forget they're going to have to go through with it themselves, too, alone, and that it's likely to be slow, painful, and sloppy. By God, you can knock off the entire state of Kansas, and they'll love every minute of it so long as they can walk out of the Bijou alive and kicking, knowing that it was the other guy that got it this time. We do the killing for them, and they can forget about the dying for awhile. Of course, it's all phony, a scam, but at least my Richard Speck'll strip it down to the bone. . . Like what Chandler used to write about. Or Hammett, before he shackled up with that uppity Hellman dame.

(If possible, a projection of of the Maltese Falcon gradually appears behind FRANK's head.)

LECTURER

Hammett! Dashiell Hammett! That's what it is! (To the audience.) And I pointed my finger at the niche above Henry's head, and the black bird inside that had been staring at me throughout the entire interview with its cold reptilian eyes.

FRANK

Yeah, that's the dingus, all right. The real one. Or should I say the real fake.

LECTURER

(still to the audience). There, in the niche above his head, right there in Henry Frank's bungalow. The stuff that dreams were made of. The Maltese Falcon. (To FRANK, approaching him.) How did you . . . how did you . . . ?

FRANK

Off the record?

LECTURER

Sure.

FRANK

FRANK

I've been a collector almost from the day I walked onto a set. Sometimes I'd buy a prop outright, sometimes barter dialogue for it, sometimes when no one was looking. . . Good thing, too. The market for collectibles has gone sky-high lately, so I've been living off the stuff, selling it piece-by-piece.

LECTURER

There's more?

(FRANK slides open another desk drawer. and takes out a small cardboard jewelry box. He opens it and removes from its cotton wadding a silver bullet.) The crew dug one just like this out of Lon Chaney, Jr.'s heart. After, of course, it had served its purpose. "Even a man who is pure in heart and says his prayers by night, may become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms and the autumn moon is bright," don't you know. Actually, it's only an alloy. Silver bullets tarnish, and you can get a much higher sheen from aluminum.

(FRANK offers the bullet it to the LECTURER.)

FRANK

Take it. It's yours.

LECTURER

No, I can't. It's too . . .

FRANK

Go on. Keep it. I got plenty more.

LECTURER

Well, if you insist.

(The LECTURER accepts the bullet, returns to sit on the wheelchair and to admire his gift.)

FRANK

FRANK

You see, the prop department ordered about a dozen since you never know when you might need a few extra for a sequel. Takes more than one aluminum alloy bullet to keep a good wolfman down. But since you're so impressed with that little trinket, what do you think of the rest of my stuff? You haven't said a word about any of it.

LECTURER

I'm sorry, but I've only been introduced to the falcon, and, of course, this wonderful bullet.

FRANK

But you've been sitting on one of my best pieces all afternoon.

(The LECTURER springs off the wheelchair, as if suddenly realizing he'd been sitting on the lap of Lionel Barrymore himself. He then points to various corners of the room as if the objects he mentions were there.)

LECTURER

(to the audience). It was Dr. Gillespie's, the one he rode down the corridors of Blair General Hospital in the Dr. Kildare films. Henry then informed me that the stuffed wire-haired terrier sitting in the corner -- its head cocked to one side as if expecting a dog biscuit -- had been the companion of Nick and Nora Charles in the Thin Man series; that the oaken table had been used by Ronald Coleman to pen Sidney Carton's farewell letter to Lucy Darnay; that the blanket covering it had been knitted by Madame Defarge; and that the small piano in the corner had been used by Dooley Wilson, Sam in *Casablanca*, to play "As Time Goes By" again and again and again.

FRANK

Of course, there's plenty more in storage, and even that's only a small remnant of what I've already sold to keep bread on the table.

LECTURER

And then he began to describe the complex and occasionally underhand transactions that led to his acquiring Zorro's mask, and Gunga Din's trumpet, and . . . (Turning back to FRANK.) And the falcon? The Maltese Falcon?

FRANK

Now there's a story for you. The rumors began even before the first day of the shoot. The art director said he got it from the producer, the producer said the New York office sent it. But the boys in the East didn't know a thing about it, and when the Fat Man first scratched the surface, he almost dropped it in the middle of the take, since he said he saw gold shining through the black enamel. After the movie was in the can, a Cypriot businessman who claimed the bird was his and was threatening to release "certain documents" if he didn't get it back, accidentally fell to his death from a hotel window. The studio put a lid on the case and locked the falcon in a special vault. But the very next day, the body of the prop manager was found inside the locked vault, the cause of his death unknown, although the purple puncture wound at the base of his neck was thought to have something to do with it. Of course, when the bird in the vault was discovered to be a plaster-of-paris imitation of the one that had appeared in the film, the lid was clamped down even tighter. By then I already had a reputation as a collector, and after the war, when American bucks were tough to come by, I got a telegram from a friend on location in Tangiers. The trail was still warm when I arrived, and from there I traveled to Budapest and then to Istanbul where I was taken blindfolded to meet with a notorious black marketeer who was eager to get rid of a certain figurine said to have been responsible for the deaths of several people in Lisbon and Marseilles. Naturally, he had once supposed it to be of great value, but despite the gold veneer beneath the black surface, it wasn't worth half of what it cost him, which included the life of one of his agents. Besides, there was talk then about an underground fascist network, claiming descent from the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, which would stop at nothing to see that it was restored to its proper owners, whoever they were. . . In short, I got the bird for a song.

LECTURER

And I'll bet it's worth a lot more now.

FRANK

Not for sale. You know what's inside the bird now? Not gold, not diamonds, just nothing. Nothing, so they'll be plenty of room for me.

LECTURER

I don't understand.

FRANK

Room for my remains. When I go, they'll put my ashes inside there. As much of me as'll fit, anyway. I've already reserved my own niche at Forest Lawn, and it'll be under lock and key in case the Templar Knights or whoever still want to get their hands on it. . . . But now you've got to be going. A buyer's coming to look at a sled of mine by the name of Rosebud. It's a little charred around the edges, but it should still fetch a pretty penny.

(FRANK exits, taking the wheelchair along with him.
The LECTURER crosses back to his lectern.)

LECTURER

I never saw or heard from Henry Frank again. Still, I continued my research into his life for some time. Although he was hardly as newsworthy as a Gable or a Garbo, I soon learned he occasionally provided copy for the gossip columnists. In fact, it was from one of Hedda Hopper's columns that I first learned of his involvement with Candy Corcoran. Hedda was covering the premiere of *Pirates of the Lost Seas* and Candy played the female lead. Apparently, Henry was her date at the opening.

(Enter HEDDA HOPPER, spotlighted stage right,
dressed in the style of the late 40s, wearing an
outlandish hat of the time.)

LECTURER

There was a photo and under it the caption:

HOPPER

At the Derby -- Candy Corcoran graciously accepting kudos for her portrayal of Kit O'Shea, the queen of the pirate king in *Pirates of the Lost Seas*. The gent providing the convenient lap, literary Svengali, H. Frank.

LECTURER

Candy was a very pretty blonde, soft, with those pudgy, Deanna Durbin girl-next-door cheeks that seemed to be fashionable then. But she also radiated a magnetic sexual appeal, which prompted Walter Winchell to label her, off-the-record of course, as:

(With the mention of Winchell, a figure dressed like a
typical rugged journalist of the 40s--in shirtsleeves,

suspenders, and Stetson hat--is spotlit stage right. He speaks in Winchell's clipped, rapid-fire speech.)

WINCHELL

The kind of gal inhabiting Andy Hardy's wet dreams.

(Spot dissolves.)

LECTURER

Most critics and the studio executives were convinced she was destined for stardom. But neither her natural talent nor her innocent sex appeal could save a work as advanced as *Pirates of the Lost Seas* from being panned by the reviewers, and when the scandal that ended her career became front-page news, *Pirates of the Lost Seas* was withdrawn from distribution. Henry Frank was never directly implicated in the affair, although every paper in the country, from the lowliest tabloid to the *New York Times* reported each revelation, detail by sordid detail -- from Candy Corcoran's arrest for possession of a reefer, to the exposure of the wild "midnight dope parties" on Malibu Beach, to her irrational behavior at the trial, to her commitment to an asylum, to her subsequent suicide. In all of this, Henry's name never appeared. . . . Yet my own search through the syndicated columns of the period, uncovered certain innuendoes and references that cannot be easily dismissed. This, for instance, is from, Hedda Hopper. . .

(HOPPER is again spotlit. As soon as she is finished the spotlight will be extinguished and appear again later, stage right, on WINCHELL and PARSONS.)

HOPPER

A noted wordsmith has recently gained a boffo credit. This one for walzing our unfortunate Candy Corcoran down the primrose path. No chance to rewrite this one Mr. F. The damage is done. It's in the can.

LECTURER

And this from Winchell . . .

(Spot on WINCHELL. Perhaps he rapid click-click of a typewriter or teletype machine in the background.)

WINCHELL

Flash! What over-paid pencil-pusher was recently floored by a pugnacious mogul for debauching a promising contract starlet? It was a feature bout last night at a celebrated Sunset Strip watering hole. We can't divulge the names of the threesome cast in this free-for-all, but for those who are keeping score, the initials are C.C., H.F., and L.B.M.

(Spot dissolves.)

LECTURER

And this from Lolly, that awful Hearst stooge, Louella Parsons . . .

(PARSONS appears spotlit stage right. The actress who played Hopper can also play her, discarding her flamboyant hat for a more conservative one, and wrapping her shoulders in a fur stoll. She speaks in the faux-aristo accent of a poseur, Eleanor Roosevelt on helium.)

PARSONS

Candy wasn't alone at those midnight revels. The Hollywood BUMS and PARASITES were there, too. And so was a young romantic lead who THINKS he still has a career. And a swing artist who will be performing for our young folks on the Palmolive Hour tomorrow night-- we HOPE for the last time! And a senior writer who violated a studio's trust. We can't -- we won't -- help you, Candy. But as sure as there's a GOOD LORD in the Heavens Above, we'll see that those who brought you to this sordid end are paid back in full.

(Spot dissolves.)

LECTURER

Apparently Henry Frank was that “senior writer,” since he never again worked on a screenplay for a major studio. But to get to the bottom of these and other stories and rumors, I wrote to Skippy Frelinghuysen. You might not recognize the name at first, but if you’re fond of silent films you might have come across "Little Skippy." Now, “Little Skippy” plays an important role in Henry Frank’s oeuvre. This is what I wrote about him in my Master’s thesis:

(The LECTURER reads from thick volume.)

LECTURER

“Little Skippy Frelinghuysen, a popular child star from the days of silent film, is best remembered for having been teamed with Bif the Wonder Hound. Like most child actors of the period, once Frelinghuysen reached puberty his career began to languish, especially after he gained too much weight for the average German Shepherd to pull from a burning building; and after the Wonder Hound, presumably out of frustration, mauled him severely, leaving him with deep facial scars, Little Skippy was said to be finished. Later in the twenties, Frelinghuysen appeared in occasional bit parts or as a stunt double-- a gladiator in *Ben Hur* (in which he was savaged by an insufficiently drugged lion) and a bootlegger in *Our Dancing Mothers* (who, unfortunately, shattered the windshield of a flivver with his head when its brakes failed). But it was Henry Frank who rescued him from obscurity. In fact, Skippy's scarred face is as much a trademark of the Frank films as the snappy dialogue and tough heroes: Slopes (in *Spawn of the Bowery*), the hero’s simple-minded buddy, tricked by the Cohn mob into betraying his friend's hideout; or Fink (in *Boulevard Baby*), the crippled sailor whose selflessness during the dockyard fire inspires Duke to sacrifice himself for his brother; or the alcoholic Hap McFutch (in *Strike It Rich*), on the wagon just long enough to

choreograph the final number on the eve of the Broadway opening.” Now here’s my conclusion: “This ubiquitous and multifaceted actor portrays the mean -- the common man. The scars on his hairless cheeks are emblematic of innocence flawed. Yet despite his evident human frailty, he is transformed, through his ultimate integrity and loyalty, into a symbol of that which endures.”

(SKIPPY FRELINGHUYSEN enters. He’s an elderly gentleman, dressed in the shoddy, casual wear of a man accustomed to a wealthy life style, but who has clearly seen better days. He approaches the lectern.)

LECTURER

I wrote to Skippy Frelinghuysen and, surprisingly enough, he answered me. His handwriting’s a little difficult to decipher, so forgive me if I have some trouble reading it to you . . .

(FRELINGHUYSEN has by now reached the lectern. He snatches the letter from the LECTURER’s hand and crosses to stage right, the spotlight following him way.)

FRELINGHUYSEN

October 1979. Dear Sir, I don't like to write letters but I thought I'd go through with this one since you say you want to write about Henry Frank and I don't know why anyone would want to write about that son-of-a-bitch unless to write he was a son-of-a-bitch, which he was. But just in case you didn't know that, I'd like to set you straight by putting in my two-cents worth. You asked me how did he get his start. The same way as a lot of us did is my answer. By hanging around the studios, and if you got asked something you came up with the biggest damn lie you could think of, and if Henry Frank could do anything it was lie. He said he was a New York writer down on his luck, and we all believed him but it didn't do him no good since before the talkies you didn't have to be no Willy Shakespeare to come up with lines like “And Came The Dawn.” Anyway, he made a few bucks by taking bit roles like me. *Range Riders of the Panhandle*, for an instance, when we were both riders in the Larrabee gang, and I too thought he was a writer then but I sure as hell could see he weren't no cowboy, and wouldn't you know it was me who fell off the horse headfirst into that patch of cactus! And then sound came along and nobody in those days could hardly talk a sentence straight let alone write one and the studios hired him on short term contracts but never picked up his option because his treatments stunk and after they imported some real New York writers he was back on the streets. And with no bit parts to fall back on neither! You could fit only about ten people on them goddamn sound stages and us extras were begging for bread so he founded the H & F Screenwriters Correspondence Academy and there must've been plenty of poor suckers out there since when I asked him “How's It Going?” he always said “Can't Complain” and whenever somebody sent him something good he'd change the characters names and mail it in over his own John Hancock. Anyway, that's how he came up with *Enemy of the People*. From some librarian somewhere, and God knows where she stole it from, but the credit gave him an in and after he twisted the plot around a couple of times and changed the names of the characters and got those scripts sold too, Metro hired him. His first assignment for Metro was to add dialogue to this comedy about Chicago gangsters, and that's where he met The Blonde Bombshell . . .

LECTURER

The Blonde Bombshell . . . You all know her as Jean Harlow, probably the hottest number in Hollywood during the thirties. She died tragically of uremic poisoning at the age of 26. What you may not know was that early in her career, she married Paul Bern, a Metro producer about twice her age. The word on the Hollywood backlots was that Bern was not very well endowed physically, actually impotent, and that he married Harlow because he *was* impotent to prove that he *wasn't*. Sounds like a pretty good plan, until you think about it. In any case, here's what happened on the night of September 3, 1932, about two months after their marriage. I'm reading from Curtis Brown's bio of Harlow.

(He reads from another book.)

LECTURER

"Much . . . has been said and written about circumstances surrounding Bern's death. The plain facts of the matter are that on September 3, nearly two months to the day after their marriage, Bern shot himself fatally over anxieties about his physical inadequacies. . . . Although newspapers made as much of it as they could, scandal was effectively averted by the powerful studio." Little Skippy, however, had a different version of the events that night in Beverly Hills.

FRELINGHUYSEN

. . . and that's where he met The Blonde Bombshell. Writers weren't Harlow's game but she was balling everyone on the lot, and when she was done with the grips it was Frank's turn. Only her new hubby caught them with their pants around their ankles and the next morning they found hubby face down in a pool of blood and a suicide note on the dresser. Louie B got there before anyone else because Frank called him first, and he got there plenty quick, too, because when he showed up he found Harlow there with Frank's prick still in one hand and the smoking gun in the other. Anyway, Frank told him what'd happened, and his price for keeping his trap shut was two more credited screenplays, which was good for plenty and which didn't do him no hurt with the other studios neither. Louie B. knew he was getting off cheap because Harlow was a big draw even though he hated her guts and he once said "She's No Lady And She'll Never Be A Mother!" and he was right, too, because she was dead before you can say cock robin. How do I know all this? Because I was there, that's how! Bern, her hubby, had hired me to repair the bathroom sink since I was between roles and I had to learn a trade to keep body and soul together after that goddamn dog practically ripped my face off! I also knew the housemaid there back when she'd been Loretta Montoya, the Spanish Flea of the Pampas, or something like that. Anyway, Loretta needed some plumbing done on herself, too, and while I was busy unplugging her fixtures, a shot rang out! I didn't see what happened but Frank didn't know that, and since I learned his language just by eavesdropping on those two parleying over the body of her dead hubby I saw to it some pretty good parts came my way when one of his scripts was being shot. So that's the history of what you called our "symbiotic alliance" although I don't know what that means even though I looked it up in the dictionary.

Anyway, I guess we were pretty “symbiotic” up to the time when that Candy Corcoran stuff hit the newsstands and the studio heads blackballed Frank over the pinochle table at Louis B's hacienda. And that’s all I think I'm going to tell you. And lay off the Harlow dirt since I plan to blow the lid off that one myself once I find a ghost writer to help me get my sentences straight since I'm not so hot at stringing them together myself as you can probably tell.

(He returns letter to the LECTURER and exits.)

LECTURER

(reading from the letter). “Cordially, Herkimer Frelinghuysen.” Of course, Frelinghuysen's letter only complicated matters, adding another layer of illusion or truth to Henry's past. Certainly his account of the Paul Bern-Jean Harlow affair could not be trusted, at least not without corroboration (and I could find, by the way, no trace of Loretta Montoya, the Spanish Flea of the Pampas, in any of my reference works. . . . But Henry's testimony before the Eightieth Congress is in the public record. It’s all in here:

(He reads from the title page of another volume).

LECTURER

Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities House of Representatives, Eightieth Congress, First Session, Washington 1947.

(COUNSEL enters stage right and sits down on one side of the table. He is followed by HENRY FRANK who settles across from him. Both are wearing suits and ties in the style of the late forties. If possible, the lighting should give the impression that the scene is being drawn from an old TV tape or documentary film.)

LECTURER

Henry Frank was among the friendly witnesses, along with Walt Disney, Adolph Menjou, and Ronald Reagan. This is from the end of his testimony.

COUNSEL

Now, Mr. Frank, to get to the heart of the matter, is it your opinion that there are Communists situated in positions of power throughout the movie industry?

FRANK

In my humble opinion, sir, the joint's crawling with them.

COUNSEL

Is this the case with all the studios?

FRANK

Well, sir, I believe that most of the studio heads are vigilant and wide-awake individuals. In fact, I was deeply moved by the courageous testimony of Mr. Warner and Mr. Mayer the other day. I'm sure they're doing everything in their power to drive these rats out of the studios and back to Russia where they belong.

COUNSEL

What group in the industry do you think bears the closest scrutiny?

FRANK

I'm sorry to say, sir, that the members of the writing profession have been the most flagrant offenders. A lot of these writers consider themselves intellectuals, and as you know, intellectuals flock to Communism like lemmings to the sea. Moreover, they're in the position to do the most damage. They're the ones who get the ball rolling, who inject the left-wing propaganda into the scripts in the first place.

COUNSEL.

In your opinion, then, it's the writer who can wield the most pernicious influence.

FRANK

Right. But it doesn't stop there. Get one of those fellow travelers in the story office and all of a sudden his pals have no trouble gaining a hearing, while scenarios from good Americans representing typical American virtues are dumped on the garbage heap.

COUNSEL

In other words, it only requires a few persons placed in strategic positions for the Communist influence to exert a virtual stranglehold on an entire industry?

FRANK

Exactly. My own experience, I think, is a good example. For years I worked on scenarios that expressed sound American values, the values of men who fight for what they believe in against any alien presence or form of thought control. But then, suddenly, only negative pictures were being filmed, those that tore down rather than built up. In fact, one of the films that I had worked hardest on, co-produced and invested heavily in, was withdrawn from distribution. An old-fashioned sword-and-cape costumer. Withdrawn for no reason at all. I stopped hearing from producers, my scenarios and my treatments were returned unread. I was told by my agent that I was no longer considered "reliable," that I had lost my touch.

COUNSEL.

Only a few more questions, Mr. Frank. Do you consider members of the Communist Party to be agents of a foreign power?

FRANK

I believe they receive their orders directly from the Comintern in Moscow and the Cominform in Belgrade. It is an oriental tyranny, a Kremlin-inspired tyranny to sap our strength and dominate the world by force.

COUNSEL

Earlier you presented the Committee with a fairly extensive list of persons you believe have direct links with the Communist Party. Do you have additional information on any other persons who have displayed such tendencies in your presence?

FRANK

Well, nobody's shown me any cards lately, but this Hollywood Committee for the First Amendment smells pretty fishy to me. Drop a few drawers and I'm sure you'll find a hammer and a sickle tattooed on more than one behind.

COUNSEL

In other words, you believe this to be a Communist-front organization?

FRANK

I think you'll get some idea of what kind of organization it is if I read off the real names of some of its members. Danny Kaye is really D.D. Kaminsky; John Garfield, Jacob Garfinkle; Lauren Bacall, Betty Joan Perske; . .

COUNSEL

Mr. Frank. . .

FRANK

Edward G. Robinson, Emanuel Goldenberg . . .

COUNSEL.

I think we need to move on to the next witness. Thank you, Mr. Frank.

FRANK

Thank you, sir, and I hope you continue the fine work you've been doing here this week. I'd like to say for the record that I believe it's the duty of every true American to stand up and be counted in these perilous times and to aid this committee in its just and lawful work.

(The scene darkens and the spot returns to the LECTURER.)

LECTURER

It was ironic that having been blackballed himself, Henry would join in a crusade that deprived many of his fellow writers of their livelihoods. I suppose he was desperate to ingratiate himself with the studios or, at least, have some crumbs of work thrown his way. But apparently only a few Poverty Row executives and Leo Gorcey appreciated his patriotism or could make use of his skills. From these last assignments in the early fifties until the time of my interview with him in the seventies, his major source of income may very well have been the fraudulent movie props which he seemed to have been profiting from for some time.

(LECTURER removes the silver bullet from his pocket, revealing it to the audience.)

LECTURER

Of course, I can't be sure that all the pieces Henry showed me were counterfeits or whether he was even a major player in the Great Hollywood Prop Plot (the unfortunate label attached to the affair by the media). No one, after all, was ever brought to trial or even arrested for the fraud. But before long *Time* and *Newsweek* were running lead stories, featuring interviews with studio heads, museum directors, and curators from the major auction houses, and at about that time, Henry Frank disappeared entirely from sight. This is one of the pr's sent out by Christies to the media and its major customers shortly before an auction of collectibles in 1981.

(He takes a paper from his pile, but before he can read from it a CHRISTIE'S EXECUTIVE,

immaculately dressed, enters stage right and reads from a similar document.)

CHRISTIE'S EXECUTIVE

"The corruption of a valuable sector of our American heritage is now occurring before our very eyes, the value of an historic legacy and counterfeiting the artistic currency of our culture."

LECTURER

But it was soon determined that some of the pieces had been in circulation for nearly twenty years, and only an insider, someone who was intimately involved with the film industry, would be knowledgeable enough to counterfeit obscure pieces that would be of interest only to collectors, props whose origin would be hard to trace. Several suspect pieces, in fact, were even proven to be authentic.

CHRISTIE'S EXECUTIVE

(interrupting the LECTURER). If you're going to salt a mine, it pays to use real gold.

(She finishes reading from the pr.)

CHRISTIE'S EXECUTIVE

"Christie's cautions the investor and collector to deal only with reputable houses who have the expertise and sophistication to ensure the provenance of even the most obscure of these treasures. In fact, if the perpetrators hadn't become so greedy, contemptuously replicating copies of the very icons of our culture, these felons might still be in business today. But when three pairs of Dorothy's ruby slippers surfaced -- all of them 6A's instead of the correct fit, a 5B -- it was only a matter of time before the industry took extraordinary steps to ensure the authenticity of every piece auctioned. It only remains now to apprehend the culprits and prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law."

(Exit CHRISTIE'S EXECUTIVE.)

LECTURER

With so many hot on his trail, no wonder Henry -- who certainly seemed to have been involved in the scheme -- burrowed deep underground. That burrow may have been found in the San Fernando Valley, within the small, ingrown world of directors, actors, and technicians producing hardcore pornographic films, where, I'm convinced, Henry became involved with such renegade production companies as Cinnamon Cinema, Priapus Productions, and Eros Arts, Inc. In any case, if you look at some of their products—I'm thinking particularly of *Annie Does Amsterdam*, *Motorcycle Mama* and especially *Randy on the Range*—you'll find a certain familiarity in their narrative arcs, and although such films rarely run reliable credits, Henry Frank's snappy dialogue

is as recognizable to me as if he had left his signature on the screen. Although I leave the necessary spadework for others to do, I have no doubt that once that research is undertaken, such masterpieces as *Harlow Does Hollywood* and, yes, *Randy on the Range*, will eventually enter the canon.

(LECTURER begins to collect his papers and books together on the lectern.)

LECTURER

My investigation pretty much ends here. Whenever I was on the West Coast, I interviewed former colleagues, people who may have known him in the film community, particularly from the Poverty Row studios-- Monogram, Majestic, Mayfair, Mascot and those are just the M's --. only to run into one dead end after another. And the last time I spoke with Skippy Frelinghuysen, he refused to see me. He was recovering, he said, from the third-degree burns he had suffered when a cigarette lighter exploded in his face.

(HENRY FRANK enters to deposit a tombstone upstage right. He exits. LECTURER approaches the tombstone.)

LECTURER

On my last trip west, I confined my search for Henry Frank to the four Forest Lawn cemeteries in the Los Angeles area. In each of them -- Glendale, Hollywood Hills, Covina Hills, and even Cypress -- I inquired whether any funerary urns in the shape of a falcon had been interred there. At none of these locations, however, could they find mention of an urn that might resemble the one I was seeking, although there were several modeled after cats and a pair of beloved dogs. Only at Glendale were there any predatory birds.

(A COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REPRESENTATIVE enters stage right, in a tie and shirtsleeves. He will position himself behind the table, now serving as a counter. He is spotlit for his speech, and after having removed his tie, he will also play the role of the SHOPOWNER.)

COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REPRESENTATIVE

They're in a private crypt. Almost the entire congregation of an animistic sect that traced its roots back to Ancient Egypt, Eighteenth Dynasty. It's the only crypt of its kind outside of the Nile Delta. Eagles, owls, even an Ibis, along with cats and crocodiles, too, but I'm not showing any falcons. The cult was a small one and it gradually faded away after the founder, Ahmed Faroud, absconded with the church treasury. Could that be what you're looking for?

(Spotlight returns to the LECTURER.)

LECTURER

I told him that it probably wasn't, and for the remainder of the afternoon, I wandered over the slopes and lawns of Graceland, Eventide, Vesperland, and Whispering Pines. In none of these places could I find anything similar to the Maltese Falcon that had stood in the niche in Henry Frank's bungalow. My last morning in L.A., I visited the Hollywoodiana shop on Melrose Boulevard, one of the largest stores dealing in posters, movie memorabilia, and collectibles. I met with the owner, showed him my silver bullet and asked him if he thought it was authentic. (The LECTURER displays his silver bullet to the

audience, and then to the SHOPOWNER behind the counter, stage right.)

SHOPOWNER

Come on over here.

(The SHOPOWNER gestures over to him, and the LECTURER crosses to stage right.)

SHOPOWNER

Look.

(The SHOPOWNER opens a drawer, and he pulls out a handful of silver bullets and then dribbles them back into the drawer.)

SHOPOWNER

Enough in that drawer to take down an entire battalion of werewolves. Ever hear of the Great Hollywood Prop Plot?

LECTURER

I've heard something about it.

SHOPOWNER

That was one of the most popular items. The guy who owned the store before me bought a dozen before he started getting suspicious. I guess that's why I own the shop now and he doesn't.

LECTURER

Did they ever catch any of the people who were responsible for the scam.

SHOPOWNER

Never did. They all must've skipped town before it really got hot. And the marks, once they figured they weren't going to see any of their money again, most of them refused to get involved or give evidence. Not worth getting your name in the paper, I guess, especially around here where being on the wrong end of a bad deal can cost you a lot of face. A damn shame, too, since some of the crap's still on the market.

LECTURER

Ever run across a Maltese Falcon? A phony one, I mean.

SHOPOWNER

Are you kidding? Anybody who would ever try palm one of those things off would be looked at mighty close. Why it's common knowledge that the real prop was stolen right from under the noses of the studio just after the picture was made. I think there were even a couple of deaths involved, and, as far as I know, the L.A.P.D. is keeping the case wide open, even after all these years. Of course, if the real thing ever does turn up, it would be worth a small fortune. (Leaning over, he brings his face close to the LECTURER's.) Why'd you ask?

LECTURER

Curiosity.

SHOPOWNER

A small fortune.

LECTURER

Really, all I've got is this silver bullet.

SHOPOWNER

I'll give you five bucks for it.

LECTURER

But it's a fake.

SHOPOWNER

You never know when even fakes might be worth something in this town. I'm willing to take that chance. For five bucks, anyway.

(The lights go down on the "shop." The LECTURER returns to the lectern, where he puts his notes and books in order, as if preparing to leave. He still holds

the silver bullet in his hand, though, and, as if in an afterthought, displays it to the audience.)

LECTURER

Five bucks wasn't enough, and Henry's silver bullet remains on my desk to this day, gleaming brilliantly whenever I turn on my reading lamp just above it. Of course, it's not real silver but since it's really made of industrial aluminum, it never tarnishes, never loses its shine.

(The spotlight on the LECTURER diminishes until it reaches a high focus on the silver bullet he is still displaying, holding it upright with two fingers, above the lectern.)

(Blackout.) END OF PLAY