



PROP

*In Hollywood, graphic
designer Michael Marcus
creates printed props for
the movies*

ART

by HARRY C. EDWARDS

"Party time!" It's halfway through the Alice Cooper concert in Milwaukee, and Wayne (Mike Myers) and Garth (Dana Carvey) suddenly remember the backstage passes hanging around their necks. They squeeze through the crowd toward a far corner of the stage, where they confidently wave the passes at the backstage security guard. He obligingly lets them through. "Excellent!" Everyone they meet in the next few minutes gets a faceful of backstage pass.

The backstage pass helps to carry this scene in *Wayne's World*—it's an important prop. Even so, few viewers stop to think about the fact that, before it could get into Wayne and Garth's hands, it needed to be designed, laid out, and printed. It's the type of work that Michael Marcus excels at. Marcus has been working on movies in Hollywood for over eight years, doing everything from painting sets to art-directing films. For the last three years, Marcus has operated his own company, Graphix in Motion, that specializes in designing and producing printed graphic-arts props—everything from newspapers and magazines to milk cartons, condom boxes, shipping labels, tickets, logos, and credit cards.

Marcus and his staff of three create props for some 20 films a year, as well as many TV projects and commercials. His work can be seen in recent films such as *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *Wayne's World*, *A River Runs through It*, *The Bodyguard*, *Leap of Faith*, *Last Action Hero*, and *The Coneheads*, as well as the upcoming *Addams Family II*.



Where do you find 20 1962-vintage Jif peanut butter jars or Fig Newton packages? Marcus created both the props on this page in Aldus FreeHand, for the upcoming film *Calendar Girl*.

Although he was born in Philadelphia, Michael Marcus grew up in Sèvres, France from the age of 5. In 1972, at the age of 24, he returned to the States on his own, visiting New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles with the vague hope of finding a job. A friend in Los Angeles, knowing of Marcus's longstanding interest in drawing, suggested that he take some graphic-arts classes. So he went back to live with relatives in Philadelphia and enrolled in a graphic-arts advertising pro-

gram at the University of Philadelphia. Immediately, he knew he'd found a field he liked. After only six months, he dropped out of school and went back to Los Angeles to look for a job.

For the next seven years, Marcus immersed himself in the trade, freelancing here and there, learning everything from pasting up mechanicals to color printing. Eventually he landed a job at an agency in Los Angeles that specialized in film advertising. Here, he got his first real taste of the film business. It was the early eighties, the movie was *The Cotton Club*, and it needed a lot of money. Marcus's firm was called in to do special preproduction artwork that the producers needed to raise money to make the film. Before long, Marcus was working directly with Robert Evans, who was then president of production at Paramount. After working with Evans for two years, Marcus was hooked on Hollywood. He wanted to be a part of it.

Because he'd had a little training in drafting, Marcus decided that the best way for him to break into the business would be as a set decorator. He began by constructing and painting sets for student productions and smaller films. His first "real" project was *Slam Dance*. The art director for *Slam Dance*, impressed by Marcus's work, started using him on other films. Over the next five years the work got steadier, and before long Marcus became an art director himself. The biggest and last film he art-directed was *Pacific Heights*.

"Art-directing a film can be overwhelming," explains Marcus. "For *Pacific Heights*, I had to build a Victorian house on a lot here in L.A. that had to match our location in San Francisco. I had to manage the carpenters, painters, and landscapers. Then I had to deal with backdrops and make sure the costumes did not clash with the interior colors. And in addition to keeping the crew happy, I had to make sure the production designer and director were satisfied. And everything had to be on budget. It was relentless."

During Marcus's tenure as an art director, he often had to buy printed props from graphic designers around Los Angeles. He quickly discovered that while most graphic artists knew graphic design, they had no idea how their work would perform on camera or in an actor's hand. So he wound up creating most of the printed props he needed for his films himself. Before long, friends started asking him to produce props for their films. Marcus wasn't slow to recognize the opportunity. About the time *Pacific Heights* finished filming, he decided to go into business for himself.

Marcus presently works out of his home in the heart of Hollywood. His computer setup is fairly basic—two Mac IIs, a laser printer, a color scanner, a color printer, and a digitizing tablet. In addition to Aldus FreeHand, Marcus and his staff like to use Adobe Photoshop, PageMaker, and QuarkXPress.



Marcus's success has come rather quickly. "It's really a small community," he says. "If you do good work and you're extremely honest and open about what you do, word gets around. I've only been in business three years and so many people know about my work who I don't know—I don't advertise, it's all been word of mouth."

It's a brief scene in "A River Runs through It." Norman Maclean (Craig Sheffer) enters the office of the *Helena Bee* newspaper, to meet his brother Paul (Brad Pitt), a reporter for the paper. The camera briefly pauses to catch, lying on a desk, a folded copy of the *Helena Bee*. Look down to brush the popcorn off your lap, and you miss it.

Even though the paper appears for only an instant, a lot of work went into getting it ready for this scene. Props that are seen up close on camera are called hero props, "and they have to look real—they're part of the story," says Marcus. "To do the research for the *Helena Bee*, we bought a paper from that era. We realized that the typography of newspapers back then used different type styles, sizes, and leading throughout, which we had to recreate." And it's not just the outside of the paper that has to look right. "There's always the risk that the director will want to do a reverse and shoot the actor holding the prop from behind. We can't just wrap the period prop cover around the *L.A. Times*. We have to produce the whole paper."

Marcus prefers to design props such as the *Helena Bee* in Aldus FreeHand. Once the paper is laid out, it's output to film at his service bureau and printed onto newsprint, then collated, folded, and trimmed by hand. Marcus even has a special metal blade to cut the serrated edge characteristic of most newspapers. Depending on the project, he'll print anywhere from 10 to 200 copies of the paper. All told, a period newspaper can cost as much as \$2,000 per page to produce.

Why all this exactitude for a one-second part? One reason is that a well-executed prop can help the actor focus on his part—a poorly designed prop is just another distraction on a set filled with distractions. Another reason is that "what we create has to look perfect—in the theater, it can be 40 feet wide on the



The *Helena Bee* appears for less than a second in *A River Runs through It*. Nevertheless, the prop required hours of research, layout, printing, trimming, and folding before it was ready for the scene.

screen," explains Marcus. "Prop masters know as well as I do what's possible and what's not. They expect the very best, and that's what I try to deliver."

Typically, when Marcus gets a job, the prop master gives him the script, which Marcus "breaks down" to determine what printed props the film needs. Then he and the prop master come up with a prop list and budget, which are almost always a best guess—it's impossible to plan all the props for a film in advance. Nevertheless, they do their best to anticipate what a particular scene may need. "If the actor is playing a waiter in a restaurant, we'll budget for a menu that the actor can use in the scene," says Marcus. "We'll also budget a notepad that the actor can take an order with, even though it's not called for in the script. And if the script calls for a shot from the rear, we might anticipate that the director will want a front shot, so I'll plan to design a logo that can be embroidered onto the front of the actor's apron."

But props are often produced at the last minute—sometimes on the day they're needed on the set. This happened with the opening scene of *Wayne's World*. One of the last scenes shot in the movie, it featured a prop called the "Suck Kut," an unlikely haircutting tool. The morning of the shoot, the prop master decided the Suck Kut needed a product logo. So after a phone call, Marcus designed the logo in Aldus FreeHand, printed it to film at his service bureau, and had a Chromatec transfer made so it could be applied to the machine—in time for the shoot at noon.

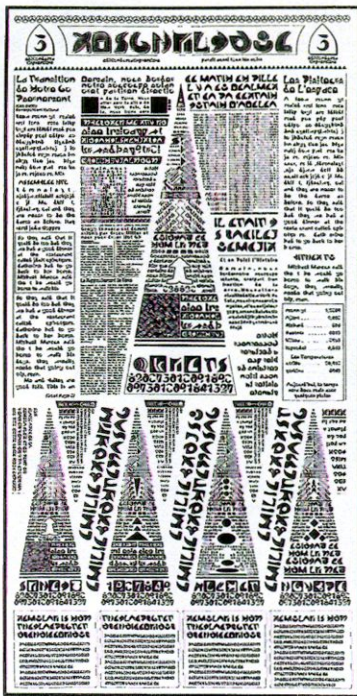
Even the best-planned props are subject to the last-minute rush. An important prop in *Last Action Hero* is the ticket that Danny Madigan (Austin O'Brien) uses to enter the movie-within-the-movie with Jack Slater (Arnold Schwarzenegger). Marcus had six weeks to produce the ticket, using a variety of techniques that involved combining output from Aldus FreeHand and Adobe Photoshop with hand-painted calligraphy. After the final version was approved, 200 copies were printed on gold paper and die-cut. The next day, after the director had seen the final ticket, he decided to have it totally changed—new concept, new size. And in-



A few of the many printed props Marcus created for *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Shown here are a shipping label, Harker's journal, and a telegram.



This is the third and final version of the magic ticket Marcus created for *Last Action Hero*.



Sometimes the demands for props are a little out of this world. For *The Coneheads*, Marcus developed an alphabet in Fontographer consisting of about 30 symbols. He then applied it to all types of consumer goods on the planet Remulak, including this newspaper.

stead of six weeks, Marcus and his crew had a matter of days to come up with the new tickets. However, not knowing there was a second ticket in the works, the special effects unit started work with the first ticket. After the second ticket was finished, the main photography unit began filming with it—the film had two different tickets. Because they couldn't reshoot every scene with the ticket, it was decided to have Marcus quickly merge the first two designs into yet a third ticket that they could use to finish filming the movie. And like the second ticket, it had to be done in a rush.

Bram Stoker's Dracula, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, was Marcus's most consuming job. "*Dracula* was very interesting for me," he says. "There were some wonderful period props that had to be created from scratch and that required lots of research on our part—stamps, documents, shipping labels, maps, and books." About a third of the props Marcus created for

Dracula made the final cut of the movie.

Although Marcus created many of the printed pieces on the computer, some of the props could only be done by hand—*Dracula's* handwriting, for example. "Gary Oldman [who played *Dracula*] was left-handed, but the director wanted a right-handed *Dracula*. So I developed *Dracula's* personal handwriting—down to the

color of the ink," says Marcus. Once Coppola had approved the style, it became the standard for all of *Dracula's* documents. And when it came time to film *Dracula* actually writing, they called in Marcus to lend his hand. "They applied makeup—lots of rubber—to my hand to make it look old. And because of the camera angle, I had to wear *Dracula's* clothes. It was all very intricate and very difficult—I had to write using a 19th-century fountain pen that leaked and didn't work well, I had to accommodate the camera and the lighting, and I had these rubber fingertips on."

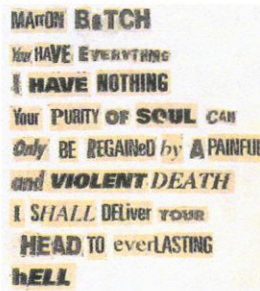
Perhaps the most memorable project that Marcus has done was a last-minute job for *Bugsy*. Harvey Keitel, one of the lead actors, brought the costume designer a biography of Mickey Cohen (whom Keitel was portraying), with Cohen pictured on the cover wearing a suit and a tie. This was what Keitel wanted to wear for his part. But because the photo was so small, no one could decipher the pattern on the tie. So Marcus was given the book cover and a script and asked to come up with a concept for the tie. After the costume designer selected one of the concepts that Marcus had designed in Aldus FreeHand, he gave Marcus a piece of silk and asked him to apply the pattern to it and have it ready the next day.

At first Marcus wanted to silkscreen the tie, but nobody could accommodate him—the silk was too fine, and there was simply not enough time. So finally, at 3 A.M., he wound up airbrushing the pattern onto the silk by hand. Later that morning, the silk was delivered to the costume shop, where it was sewn into a tie. That afternoon, Keitel was wearing it on the set. Keitel liked the tie so much that he asked to keep it. So before giving the tie to Keitel, the wardrobe department sent it out to be cleaned. What came back was a white piece of silk—nobody had been told the tie had been hand-painted.

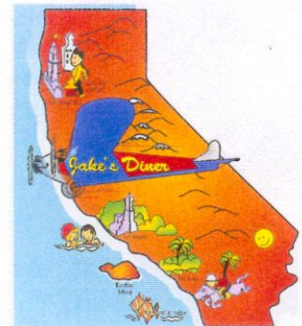
For Marcus, the tie is a metaphor for what Hollywood is all about: "Movies entertain us for two hours, and that's it. They're quickly forgotten, and it's time to move on to the next project." **R**



Labels for these products were made in Aldus FreeHand to cover existing products in the movie *Falling Down*. They fall to Michael Douglas's baseball bat in the Korean-market scene.



The ransom note from *The Bodyguard*. After the words were set in Aldus FreeHand, they were cut, assembled, and aged. Twenty identical notes were created for the film.



This menu is from *Forever Young*. The final front, back, and inside panels were created in Aldus FreeHand, then printed to an Iris printer, assembled, and laminated.