**MAKING A REAL MOB EPIC**by Joseph Alexandre My project, **Back Home Years Ago: The Real Casino**, aired on WTTW, Channel 11, Chicago's PBS affiliate. It started as a commissioned segment for John Pierson's show Split Screen on the Independent Film Channel and aired on the 18th episode of the second season, the same season **The Blair Witch Project** first saw the light of day. But, my connection to this mob material goes back to the mid to late 1980's. As you'd guess from the title my film is about the real people who formed the basis for the Scorsese mob epic, who were originally from Chicago, as well as Milwaukee. I spent a significant amount of time in both cities, Milwaukee because I attended Marquette University, and Chicago is where I lived after I graduated. I worked in the restaurant business in both towns and gravitated to Italian eateries because my maternal grandfather was from Povincio di Compobasso, in Molise. I first heard of Frank 'Lefty' Rosenthal (Robert DeNiro in the film) when I was working at a Chicago style pizzeria. He was never referred to by name, but was simply called 'the guy'. 'The guy' is coming out with his bowl picks. 'The guy' knows if the quarterback is on coke, he knows about crooked zebras, doped up horses, the way the ball bounces on a certain court. Flash forward ten years and I heard these almost exact same lines coming out of Joe Pesci's mouth in the film Casino when I first saw the film in a suburban Chicago theater. Pesci's character, Nicky Santoro, was based on a man named Tony Spilotro, who was from Chicago, and who I would learn later I had an indirect connection to.

By this time, I had made the plunge into filmmaking and had completed my first, albeit no- budget, feature film. In the spring of 1996 I purchased John Pierson's book http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0786882220/ref=ase\_allenrichards/102-4434436-5971326?v=glance&s=books. I was enthralled as it seemed here was a guy who championed the kind of films I wanted to make. I digested the book fully and made mental notes about Mr. Pierson's likes and dislikes, and particularly his sense of humor. I was already in the midst of my second feature, **In Hock And Staying There**, taken from a chapter of said book. About a year later I found myself in the upper midwest, as I had to leave Chicago for reasons I won't mention here. Anyway, I decided to pick up Nicholas Pileggi's book Casino, as I had done with **Wiseguy**, to compare the source material with the movie. **GoodFellas** was one of the reasons I wanted to become a filmmaker as I was electrified by it's reality. These were the kind of people I really knew from the restaurant business and was blown away by the veracity of it, as well as the South Ozone Park, Queens, Brooklyn, and Long Island locales. I'm from New York originally. In fact, my aunt lived in Rockville Centre, NY which is where Henry Hill moved to after getting out of Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary. (“Come on Karen, where getting out of here, we’re moving” says Henry. Karen replies, “With what?” Henry retorts, “Don’t worry with what. I got things lined up with these guys! Who wants to go to uncle Paulie’s?”) They end up moving to Rockville Centre, Long Island and not long after Henry gets pinched. You could say I grew up around Wiseguys, especially ‘when I went away to college’, literally!

When I read **Casino** I realized I actually knew, or knew of, many of the real people who formed the basis for the picture. It didn't register when I saw the Scorsese film because all the names had been changed due to legal purposes, but I remembered the way Pesci described 'Ace' (Rosenthal) in the film.

At the same time, I had completed my first very raw, rough cut of my second no- budget indie and was summoning up the courage to send it to Mr. Pierson. I saw that in a deal memo included in the book, the address and phone of Grainy Pictures, Mr. Pierson's company, was included, and lo and behold it was his current phone number. So I sent my meager film, which was somewhat similar to Chris Smith's film American Movie, another Pierson acolyte, with a hand written letter that was as witty and humble as I was able to muster. In April of 1997, exactly one week to the day I mailed my package, Mr. Pierson's voice was on my answering machine. No shit! In my short career as a filmmaker this kind of thing never happened to me. Unfortunately, he liked my letter more than my film, but he mentioned the possibility of me doing something for his new show Split Screen. I was juiced and immediately started to think of ideas. Around this time Kevin Smith's **Chasing Amy** came out, of which Mr. Pierson was an executive producer, and was savaged by a local critic. I thought it would be fun to turn the tables on the film critic and make them justify both their qualifications and opinions, and in the process of writing my pitch I went after the goddess herself, Pauline Kael. Big mistake! Not only is the bulk of the film work John represents review driven, he also happens to be a big fan of Kael's work. (Not me, I can't think of a critic who was more wrong about more great films and filmmakers than old Pauline. Championing people like Brian DePalma and Walter Hill at the expense of filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman and Stanley Kubrick. Not to mention, she ripped **Raging Bull** & **GoodFellas**!!!) Anyway, back to the drawing board, and that's when I realized I should pitch this Casino idea. Bingo! I heard back from John that summer explaining the show was on hiatus but he liked the idea for the second season, Spring 1998. In the meantime, I spoke to one of the show's producers, Howard Bernstein, to get a feel for the show, and what kind of money we're talking, $2,500 to 5,000, and then put together a budget and sent it out as well as a sort of treatment. In my treatment, I explained who the real people were and their characters in the film. I was able to interview Frank Buccieri, whose brother Fiore, FiFi Buccieri, was the basis for the composite character Remo Gaggi, the mob's top boss in the film, and who in reality, along with his brother, were Sam Giancana's right hand men.) They were the muscle. (In addition, Chicago ‘Outfit’ boss Joey Auippa and Milwaukee boss Frank ‘the mad bomber’ Balistrieri served as other real Wise guys who make up that composite of Remo Gaggi. Although, Balistrieri looked the most like the actor, Pasquale Cajano, playing him.) Frank Buccieri also got 'Lefty' (DeNiro) his job at the Stardust casino (Tangiers in the film.) Also, I was able interview a good friend, whose restaurant I made a commercial for, Mike G., and whose first cousin was part of Tony Spilotro's (Pesci) crew and who grew up in the same neighborhood as 'Lefty' and Tony. The Grand and Ogden neighborhood in Chicago's northwest side. Also, I spoke with a good friend whose family was close with the Spilotro family and close to Alan Dorfman (Alan King). I tried to get some friends in Milwaukee to talk about Frank Balistrieri, I had worked in several places that were ghost owned by 'Uncle Frank' and started at Marquette right as the trials were in Kansas City in full swing in the mid 1980’s and knew several of his relatives. But, alas no one wanted to talk. (One old running pal of mine, is currently reputed to be the head of the Milwaukee Mob, which would clearly explain that reluctance to shoot the bull☺ I also sent the detailed budget which came to about $3,500 and waited to hear back as fall turned into winter, and then I got a call after the holidays in January of 1998 from Mr. Pierson himself.

It was a great conversation as I also discovered what Kevin Smith meant when he said John could slip into his deal making mode. He explained that Universal Pictures released Casino and while I could use fifteen seconds of free footage under the fair use clause in copyright law I had to be very judicious with the footage. He also gave me the number of Eureka Pictures, where the show's production office was located in lower Manhattan, and told me to hammer out the money details with Howard. I would soon discover a few things about Mr. Pierson's mode of operation. First, I definitely got the feeling Howard was good cop to John's bad cop. And secondly, and most importantly, John's wife Janet was definitely an equal part of the show. At this point I had addressed everything to Mr. Pierson exclusively, and I would learn later that this was a big mistake as I didn't even realize it was Janet I was talking to half the time I called Grainy's upstate office. It wasn't until I had already shot and half edited the piece that I fully realized her huge input into the show. (This makes The Village Voice's Amy Taubin and her criticism that Split Screen was exclusively male- centric all the more ridiculous, I told John I should have done that critic piece.) Anyway, the time came to haggle over money and even though it was pretty much agreed the budget was in the $3,500 area, I realized I had some problems with my crew. I had planned to use some guys in Chicago who I'd shot high profile (Christine Hefner, President of Playboy) wedding videos with and I figured they'd be jacked to finally do something cool as they were both film school grad's. These jagoffs couldn't be bothered, so now I had to pay a sound and camera guy as well as hotel and expenses (remember I'm up in the frozen tundra now.) Combine this with the fact that Mr. B. wanted a little a tribute for his time and this budget started to expand. However, I figured I'd be all right as I'd spoken with another filmmaker who had contributed to Split Screen and had been given five grand. I figured old Marty was worth at least that much as how many times do you get to look over the shoulder of a world class filmmaker and compare his film with the reality it was based on. I mean Casino is still his costliest, most ambitious project (logistically at least) to date, (not any more w/ Gangs of NY and The Aviator) and what's an extra fifteen hundred to capture this rare opportunity. Wrong! After faxing the updated budget to Howard I called the next day to see what he thought and John immediately stepped in to set the record straight.
"Look, I already sent a check for $3,500 that I'm ready to cancel as this thing is getting to be too much of a hassle. We have a lot of filmmakers doing a lot of good pieces and this isn't going to change the world. If you want to make it work for that, by all means, and if this works there will be other episodes. If it turns out great, maybe we can revisit the money issue. I certainly hope you won't blackmail me with the episode after you've shot it 'cause like I said there will be more episodes." Well, I felt like a kid who just been sent to the principal's office, which was a joke John would use later as I would find myself in his dog house a few more times. A few days later the check would come with a note from John saying, "don't spend it one place." Now the reality hit me, I mean here's a guy who's never met me in person (which is still the case) and he's just sent me a check for $3,500. How many times does that happen, let alone from the guy who wrote Spike Lee a check. I was in pretty good company.

We left for Chicago the last weekend of January 1998 and I brought down three other guys: A camera man, a sound guy, and a friend who served as a P.A. These guys were pretty white bread and wouldn't know the difference between a 'made' guy or a cable guy, and they would be a good barometer for what the normal audience reaction would be. On the first night, we shot an interview with my friend Mike G. who regaled us with several mob stories about Tony Spilotro and some of the big bosses like Jackie Cerone, whom he didn't care for much. One particularly harrowing story was about Mike's cousin Leo who was part of Tony's crew and got into an argument with his brother in their father's bar, he went out to his car, got a gun, and shot his own brother. The bullet severed his spine and after living in a wheel chair for several years he finally died. Leo didn't spend a day in jail as his father was heavily connected, but when the stuff hit the fan, as documented at the end of Casino, Leo did fifteen years for Spilotro, otherwise he'd have wound up in a car trunk. After the interview, I'd asked the boys what they thought and they were definitely blown away. I knew I was on to something. We went on to the hotel where Allan Dorfman (Alan King) was gunned down and continued interviewing these friends of mine who had grown up around the film's major players. We finally got to Mr. Buccieri.

Before the interview he said, "Now Joe, I want you to understand I always tried to save guys from their own stupidity. But, if a guy was stupid I had to get rid of 'em. Capiche!" Given the fact that I had known Mr. Buccieri's daughter for a number of years it wasn't until much later that I realized this little comment was for my benefit. I must also say that Mr. B's brother was one of the most feared guys in Chicago mob history, as he was Sam Giancana's personal henchman. In fact, it's rumored that Giancana would never have been killed in 1975 if Mr. B's brother, FiFi Buccieri, were still alive (he died in 1973 of cancer) as the fear of his wrath was that great. Between the two brothers, they probably accounted for personally putting away more than 50 guys. That's a lot bodies in car trunks. On the way home, we stopped in Milwaukee to shoot some footage of the east side, the Italian- American community where I worked while in school, and expound on the Milwaukee connection to the film. Alan Glick (Kevin Pollack) first approached Balistrieri for a loan from the central states teamsters pension fund in order to buy both the Fremont and Stardust casinos. Balistrieri, as well as the bosses in Chicago, Kansas City, and Cleveland really controlled the teamsters and they all conspired to skim the casino's dry. Balistieri also had a funny connection to the film Donnie Brasco. The real FBI agent Donnie Brasco was a guy named Joe Pistone and he had infiltrated the New York mob and tried to do the same to the Milwaukee boss. He tried to convince him to go in on their night club operation in Florida, but somehow the beer city don found out that he was working for the 'Gee' and just pulled out of the deal. In essence the Milwaukee mob was even smarter than the New York mob. Go figure. Anyway, it was time to edit and as you could probably imagine this piece might be a little longer than the five minutes that was usually suggested.

The first cut I sent to John was a little shy of twelve minutes and in a note I said this was the cut I wanted to go with. (I'd sent a real rough twenty minute piece to Howard just to show them the footage.) I got a message on my machine from John and could tell he was real irritated and called him back ready to get another dose of his candor. He said he just got back from the road, so he was a little cranky. ( That season was the one in which the Split Scree crew traveled in an RV looking for indie stories around the country.) The bottom line was seven minutes period, end of story. I was starting to get the feeling that if John were to update his book I'd be under the chapter entitled 'Amongst Jerks'.

Anyway, the sobering time came to add up the receipts and see how much I actually spent. Not only did I exceed the $3,500 I spent a grand total of $5,700 as I shot a lot of Super 8 footage of the Grand and Ogden area that Mike G., Tony Spilotro, and 'Lefty' Rosenthal were from as well as the hotel where Dorfman was whacked. I had that footage transferred at Super 8 sound in Burbank,CA to Betacam SP and it wasn't cheap, but it also added quite a bit of texture and production value. I edited the piece at SPNN, a local cable access center that had just upgraded their editing suites to include cuts- only Betacam SP, which is the format I'd shot my inter- views with. Unfortunately, the cuts- only format didn't provide cg for lower third captions to mark who was who, so when the time came to online the footage on Grainy's Avid system, where they provided the lower third captions, which was another source of irritation to the Split Screen folks. I was getting to be a little too high maintenance. In subsequent conversations with John he said I would probably air on the 17th or 18th episode sometime in May. The opening episode was slated for April 6th, 1998 and I was hoping to get on that one, but it wasn't to be.

In the course of our conversations another problem arose. In my piece, I would intermittently appear to explain who was who. For instance, Tony Spilotro was the real person, Nicky Santoro was his name in the film, and he was played by Joe Pesci. I felt the material needed a guide to explain the significance of the people and real locales. John made the comment that some people in the office felt I was in it too much, and Howard had said something similar re-iterating that John was the host. Fair enough. I completed the version that aired as it came in at 7:21 and sent it out with plenty of time to spare. By this time, I'd subscribed to IFC and watched, and taped all the episodes for that season, episode #11 which had been the follow up to the Blair Witch footage. The previous season's last episode included the set up for what became The Blair Witch Project in which they set up the phony history of the witch in Maryland, the lost footage from the missing film student's, etc. I watched that episode and was im- pressed with eeriness of the 'found footage'. But, there was one segment that totally blew my mind and left a bad taste in my mouth about the entire show. It was called 'The Girl with the Red Sweater' and was directed by Marina Zenovich. It was this lame six minute segment about this guy named 'angry man' whose film screened at Slamdance and during his screening he spotted an attractive woman in a red sweater in the audience. The segment follows him to LA as he is obsessed with this unknown woman in the red sweater, and pleads that he's a nice guy and just wants to talk to her and if she sees the show call the Split Screen offices. Here I was trying to bust my ass to get these mob guys to talk about the real people who formed the basis for a $50 million Scorsese epic and it seems like all I'm getting is flack about money, time, etc. Meanwhile this idiotic blather about some bimbo in a red sweater is airing in the first episode.

I watched that whole season and was generally impressed with the show, with a few exceptions. It finally came time for my segment which aired on episode #18 on Monday, May 25, 1998. There were a few problems: It was airing smack dab in the middle of the Cannes film festival and also conveniently fell on Memorial day. Great tv watching time, regardless it went very well. John gave me the best intro to any of the pieces thus far, as this segment originated in Kansas City. John stood outside the Villa Capri, which is where the bosses divided the skim from Las Vegas, also well documented in the movie. But, before my segment aired there was another average piece about two films called 'Half Cocked' and 'Radiation' (which screened in 1999's Sundance.) It was by a husband/wife team named Mike Galinsky and Suki Hawley and was about the filmmakers traveling with a band in Spain, shooting a film by day, then screening their previous film at night after the band played. It may have been a good idea on paper but it was pretty mediocre tv, and without being too negative or hyper critical, this is what I was bending over backwards to make room for. (This filmmaking team went on the make the brilliant doc **Horns & Halos**, which is by FAR the best thing they’ve done. A GREAT film!) I was a little irritated, but as John had previously made clear it was his show and I was not changing the world. Anyway, luckily for me the show would air again in August on Bravo on IFC Friday Nights. I checked the Grainy Pictures website to see if there was any comment on my piece on the web board. No such luck as the web site had been totally consumed with everything Blair Witch. I should say right here and now that I was not a huge fan of the film although I appreciated it. Most importantly, if John did not get a piece of TBWP pie, he should. Everyone, particularly the folks at Artisan, are quick to take credit for their brilliant use of the internet in their marketing. Bullshit! John Pierson is really the guy who de-serves the credit. The project first aired in late 1997 and again in April 1998, from that time until the Haxan folks finally got their site up around November of 1998, when they got into Sundance, Grainy Pictures site was the only place you could go to for Blair Witch hype for a solid six month period to the tune of a half million hits a week. Artisan didn't get involved until well into 1999 after they bought the film and the cat was way out of the bag amongst what would become the core audience. Having said all that I was to get one more eye opener in my Split Screen saga.

As the second season drew to a close with episode #20, a filmmaker living in my neck of the woods did a piece on a man named Al Milgrom. Who you say? He's a local arthouse programmer. My D.P. on **The Real Casino** also shot this piece and told me not only did this filmmaker get a full $5,000, but also a full eleven minutes for this segment. (Which was pretty good by the way.) This same filmmaker has gone on to do four other segments, at $5,000 a pop, that have been about the Billy Graham holy filmmaking team, the real field of dreams where the Kevin Costner film was shot in Iowa, Jesse 'the body' Ventura, and a segment that aired in 2000 about a Donna Reed film festival somewhere in the midwest. Actually all pretty good segments, but not exactly changing the world either.

I went on to edit a full version of my segment which came in at just shy of thirty minutes and screened at New York City's Anthology Film Archives in June of 1999, and a twenty four minute version of the film which will air on the aforementioned Chicago PBS affiliate, WTTW, in January , 2000. I sent the longer version to several festivals including Slamdance, SxSW, NYUFF, and the CUFF, but to no avail. I also sent several pitch's to John about story ideas, including an idea to do a story about the making of a new film about Gordon Parks which is being produced by Denzel Washington and St. Clair Bourne, but again to no avail. After my segment aired I pretty much never heard from John again. "Remember there will be other episodes," he'd said. Right, pull this leg and it plays jingle bells. I wrote a script entitled WiseAcre which is about my experiences in the making this episode for Split Screen, it's more like The King Of Comedy than any of the mob films out there as it's about an obsessed filmmaker who will do anything to make it, including sidling up to the mob to make his breakthrough project a reality. To date it's gotten initial interest from Oliver Stone, Harvey Keitel, and Regent (Gods and Monsters) and I'm still trying to get names attached.

In the end, I was thrilled to death to work with someone of John Pierson's stature, as he was the first person to give me a break and legitimize my career with some financial backing and national exposure. In return, I think I gave him a pretty damn good piece, for a damn good price, in which we see a real side of life a lot of people only know from the movies. It's not as if you can just roll out of bed and decide, "hey, I think I'll interview some mob guys today." I just wish the people at Grainy understood, and appreciated, the kind lengths I went to in order to get them this segment. Epilogue The Real Casino is on DVD now from Sub Rosa studios and can be found at netflix http://www.netflix.com/MovieDisplay?movieid=60034168&trkid=97413 and was also licensed by TF 1 who co-financed Casino for a special edition release in 2003 http://www.amazon.fr/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00008JNDP/171-2225583-1597827

[http://www.amazon.com/Real-CASINO-Special-Bonus/dp/B008PBCT0A/ref=sr\_1\_1?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1347739485&sr=1-1&keywords=The+Real+Casino+Special+edition](http://www.amazon.com/Real-CASINO-Special-Bonus/dp/B008PBCT0A/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1347739485&sr=1-1&keywords=The+Real+Casino+Special+edition)

https://www.fandor.com/films/back\_home\_years\_ago

The film went on to almost triple it’s budget from licensing fees thru TF 1, PBS, cable sales, Airlines, vhs and may make much more money if a deal goes through that may include it on a special edition DVD from Universal. Joe went on to direct several other shorts and is pitching several scripts in LA. John Pierson took a break from Indie film and spent time in Figi, his experience ended up being documented by Hoop Dreams director Steve James. Reel Paradise, the resulting film, was at Sundance ‘05 and will be at SxSW and will be coming out in 2005. He was a Professor at UT-Austin and currently runs the Jacob Javits film center in Westchester County, NY. His wife Janet Pierson is the Executive Director of the South by Southwest Film festival.