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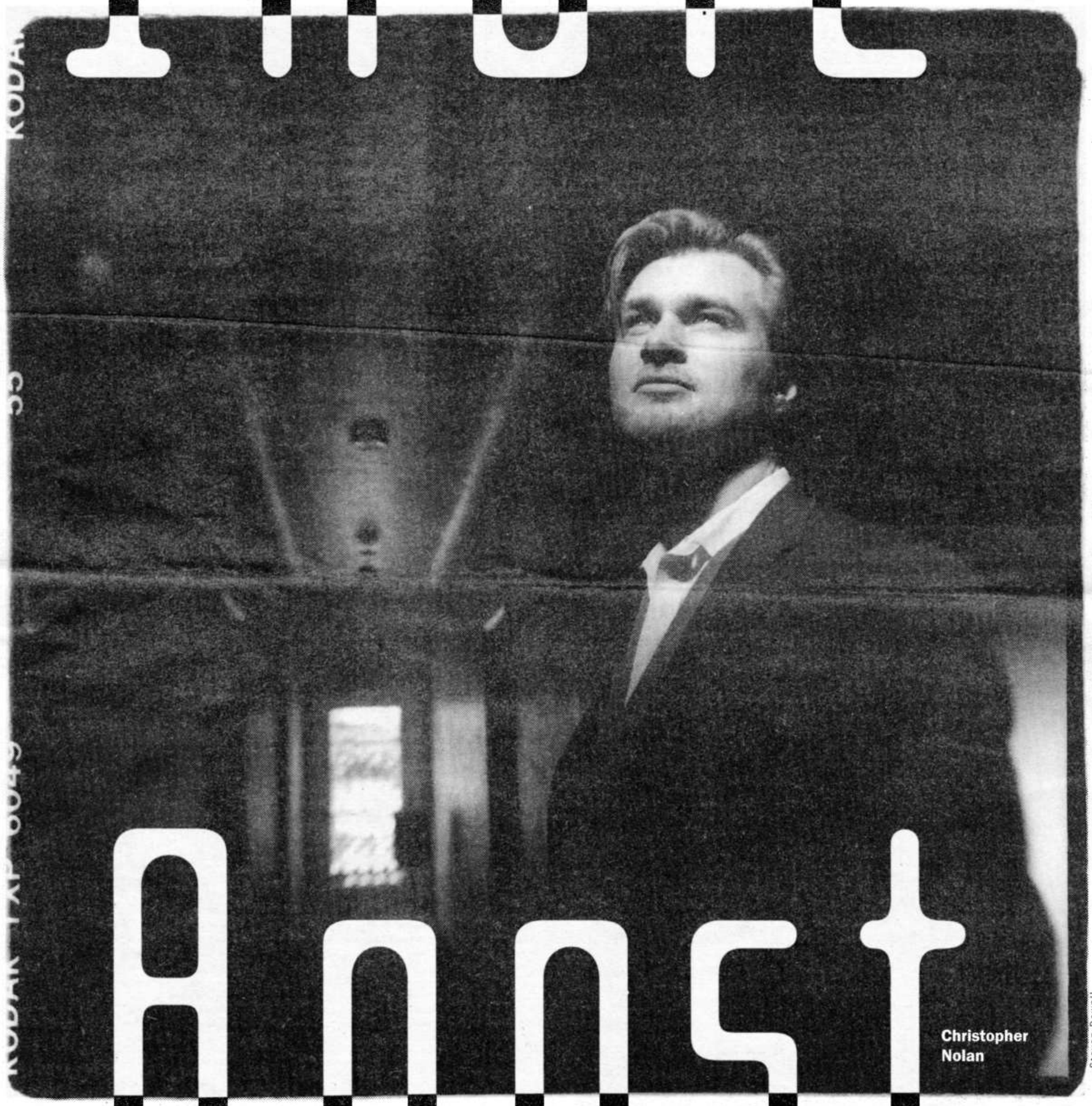
Indie Angst



Christopher Nolan

With his new movie, *Memento*, director Christopher Nolan took the noir film to a whole new time and place. And struggled to find a distributor.

BY SCOTT TIMBERG

The most striking film in months comes from a 30-year-old British-born Angeleno who's making a habit of tight, baffling movies that work like puzzles. Starring Guy Pearce (*L.A. Confidential*) and Carrie-Anne Moss (*The Matrix*), *Memento* is a contemporary noir that follows a nowhere man with a rare brand of amnesia that keeps him from making new memories: He lives life as if writing on cellophane — nothing sticks. As the film starts, he's just killed a guy, and he's wondering who and why and taking a Polaroid for reasons that are not immediately clear.

Oh, one more thing: The film plays backward, telling its story in 10-minute sequences and then jumping back to the events that preceded it.

Perhaps it goes without saying that *Memento* — like *Following*, Nolan's debut film of two years ago — is an unusual viewing experience. But it is a strangely intimate one as well. We're weirdly tied to the film's main character, Leonard (a bleached-blond Pearce, donning a pale, ill-fitting suit). Because we haven't seen what just happened, we're as confused as Leonard, who doesn't remember what just happened. Both viewer and protagonist are pulled along in a dazzling train of disorientation.

Christopher Nolan, the film's director and screen- continued on page 14

Indie Angst

continued from page 13

writer, enjoys this sort of bewilderment. "You know what this has that I love," Nolan says, slipping Radiohead's eerie CD *Kid A* into his stereo and sitting down to discuss his film. "I have a very good visual memory — I need one to do my job — and I've seen the film thousands of times. But if I walk into a screening, 25 minutes in, I don't know what scene comes next. The whole idea was to make a film that bled into the mind a little bit, spun in your head, that you constructed very much yourself. And when I listen to this album, no matter how many times I listen to it, I don't know what comes next."

Nolan, who lives in an apartment on a quiet street near the L.A. County Museum of Art, could be a newly appointed lecturer on philosophy at a British university; he relishes discussing issues like ambiguity, perception, the difference between objective and subjective reality. But you don't have to be a philosopher, or a Radiohead fan, to enjoy his film, which builds to a crashing climax that seems to explain everything. Or does it? *Memento* — cinematic fragments and amnesiac narrators and all — adds up to the most intriguing spin on film noir since *L.A. Confidential*. "I loved it," announces Peter Farrelly, the writer and director of *There's Something About Mary*, running into the hotel room where Nolan is speaking with the press, to offer congratulations. "I was watching this and thinking, He'll never be able to pull this off. It blew my mind! I felt like I did when I saw *The Usual Suspects*."

The film has also drawn the praise of Steven Soderbergh, who's become Hollywood's most vital director by fusing the mainstream and independent film aesthetics with his recent films *Out of Sight*, *The Limey*, and *Traffic*. "*Memento* is extremely impressive, both in its conception and its execution," says Soderbergh, who calls during shooting for *Oceans 11*. "He knows what to do with actors, what to do with a camera, and he knows how to structure a story. Selfishly speaking, it's the kind of stuff I like, because he's interested in fragmenting his narratives. I liked *Following*, but *Memento* is a quantum leap forward for him."

Memento becomes even more startling at its conclusion, where most contradictions in the plot resolve themselves. If this movie makes money, it will be in the repeat viewing that many people will find hard to resist. The movie's storytelling and style seem the natural outgrowth of Soderbergh's statement that *The Limey* was an attempt to make the gangster film *Get Carter* using the techniques of French New Waver Alain Resnais (*Hiroshima, Mon Amour* and *Last Year at Marienbad*). This yoking of the experimental to the pulp has produced an innovative strain in American indie film that was in evidence at least as far back as Quentin Tarantino's first movies. Nolan takes it to the next level. *Memento* shows a new freedom in American film — a flexibility and brisk confidence with narrative — as young directors borrow the techniques of the postmodern novel and the French art film and apply them to pulp and genre material. This freedom has developed even as the independent film establishment grows more conservative.

Not surprisingly, *Memento* — despite its success on the festival circuit and the advocacy of an influential filmmaker — has had trouble getting distribution. It has been taken on by Newmarket Films, a small L.A. company that hopes to do for it what the Shooting Gallery did for Mike Hodges' *Croupier*. (Newmarket, which has funded films from *Topsy-Turvy* to *The Mexican*, was also *Memento*'s financier, and chose to deflect offers from distributors. It's a little like Dick Cheney heading George W. Bush's vice presidential search and then suggesting himself for the job.)

Memento not only plays with noir convention; it also picks up a longstanding literary and cinematic lineage of amnesia. The film works in — and subverts — a tradition, perhaps several traditions. The real strength of *Memento* isn't in the way it echoes off the world of other films and novels, but the way it draws you — pulls you — into its own.

Nolan grew up split between London and Chicago, the son of a British father who ran an advertising firm and an American flight attendant mother. He started making films at the age of seven or eight, borrowing his father's Super 8 camera and shooting little movies with action figures and kids in the neighborhood, including, as it happens, the Belic brothers, who would go on to make the acclaimed documentary *Genghis Blues*.

"Some of my earliest memories are of Chris making movies," says his brother Jonathan, a 24-year-old writer who calls himself Jonah and who came up with the idea from which *Memento* bloomed. "Of asking my brother to be in his stupid little stop-action movies, asking if I could be an extra. You know how you're supposed to have a character arc in a screenplay? My brother would not make a good character. There's no arc. There's a straight vector line, straight out of the womb: *Filmmaker*. Didn't waver, didn't wrestle with any of the doubts that plague the rest of us."

Nolan studied literature at University College London, because of a long interest in fiction. A passion for Raymond Chandler led him to James Ellroy, and, looking into Ellroy's influences, he was especially struck by pulp poet Jim Thompson. Nolan says he's learned a lot, especially about narrative and chronology, by reading contemporary novels. "I got into filmmaking purely as a means of stringing images together, scenes. Then I came to understand narrative. Studying English was a very good way to give myself more grounding in the word." And he began thinking about one of his favorite novels, Graham Swift's *Waterland*, the haunting story of a mysterious death in rural southeastern Britain. "What [Swift] does, which absolutely struck me, is apply a series of parallel time lines, and jump between them," the director says. "It's a wonderful way of reimagining a story." He was also able to borrow equipment from the university's film society on weekends in order to make short films.

As he studied literature, he saw that a tale could be told from any angle, in any order. "The only useful definition of narrative I've ever heard is 'the controlled release of information.' And these novelists and playwrights — they're not feeling any responsibility to make that release on a chronological basis. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that we don't feel that responsibility in day-to-day life." He draws a parallel with the way we tell a story in conversation, sometimes leading with the conclusion and backing up, just as newspaper stories back up from the headline to fill in background.

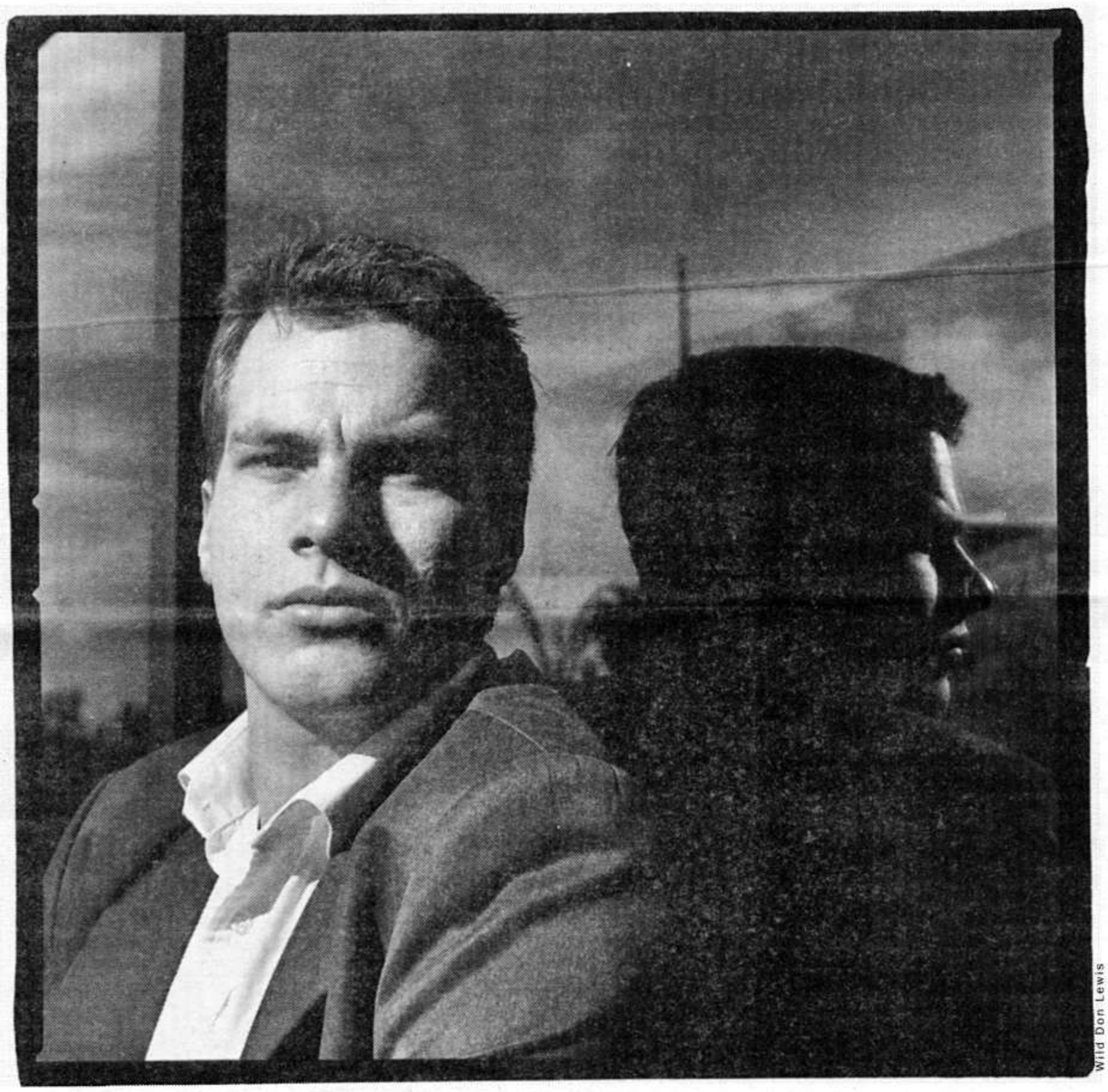
It was this sense of narrative — as something infinitely flexible to the artist's demands — that Nolan brought to *Following*. The 70-minute film, about a disheveled young writer who follows people for sport and then becomes, almost accidentally, the companion to a genteel housebreaker, seems to be told in a straightforward way, until it twists brilliantly.

It's hard to watch the film and not be struck by the inventiveness, the polish, the sense of menace it maintains so well, the way Harold Pinter does in his plays. It's the kind of movie that announces, quietly, the arrival of a sharp and unusual talent. All this for a film rehearsed and shot on weekends while its writer-director was working nine to five making corporate training videos — a task that could numb the soul. Because of the expense of 16mm film stock, the movie was mostly first and second takes, though it's hard to see it in the finished product. "*Following* hasn't a hint of amateurism, technically or aesthetically," *New Times*' Andy Klein wrote when the film opened.

Though obscurely released, the movie was well reviewed — the *New Yorker* said it "echoes Hitchcock classics" but was "leaner and meaner" — and helped Nolan earn support for the new film by proving he could pull off an unconventional narrative. But he bristles when people say *Following* was just a stepping-stone.

"When people talk about 'calling card films' and things like that, I get a little bit irate," he says. "If you want to make a calling card, go to Kinko's. You don't spend four years slaving over a story line — you would never!" To make a good movie takes commitment, dedication to the art for its own sake; he grew frustrated when people asked him when he was going to make a "real" movie. "I had no expectation for what that film was going to do in practical terms, none whatsoever. I had hopes and ambitions.... But what I said to everyone involved is, let's just have fun making the film, do it because we're going to enjoy the experience."

He explains his passion a bit further. "For me, making a no-budget film *is* filmmaking. It doesn't make any difference what level it's at. It's very satisfying filmmaking, because the only sacrifices are practical ones. The filmmaking process in my head, the imaginative process, was



Wild Don Lewis

All in the family: brother Jonah Nolan, whose short story forms the basis for *Memento*.

identical to making a film for millions of dollars. When I made a film with a bigger budget, I realized it's the same thing. You've just got more trucks."

Nolan got the chance to work on a larger scale thanks to a fortuitous long-distance drive. In summer 1997, he flew from London to Chicago to meet up with Jonah and drive their father's old Honda Prelude to Los Angeles. Nolan's wife, Emma Thomas, had gotten a job at a film company in Los Angeles, and Jonah, a junior at Georgetown University, volunteered to come along. Recalls Jonah, who is as American as Chris is British and loves Melville and Homer: "We'd sort of run out of things to say to each other, as brothers do." So he told Chris about the idea for a story he'd had, inspired by a survey class in general psychology.

"He said his concept was this guy," Chris remembers, who had trouble making new memories, who was looking for revenge on the guy who had given him the condition and killed his wife. And he'd taken to using his body to record information, with tattoos."

This immediately struck Chris as a good idea. Though the car's timing belt broke two weeks later and the vehicle was sold for scrap, the idea was born. The story — a short mood piece that Jonah says is not typical of his more black-humored work — appears in the March issue of *Esquire*. The film opens tomorrow.

Part of what's interesting about *Memento* is that it works firmly and faithfully in the noir tradition without being a self-conscious pastiche of trench coats and fedoras. Nolan treats noir as a living tradition instead of as a fossil or museum piece with fetishized, self-referential surface details.

"When you look at what film noir was, and what it's remembered as, you see that those are two very different things," Nolan says. "And I get very annoyed when people refer to this as a retro noir. It's not a retro noir — it's a *film noir*. It's contemporary. We have the dark shadows, but we don't have the guy in a trench coat in the alleyway. If you look back at *Double Indemnity*, you see everybody was wearing fedoras — that wasn't an unusual thing for guys in those days. There are scenes in a supermarket, scenes in a bowling alley, in that film. No one remembers that."

Nolan went looking for the contemporary equivalent of the noir cityscape: "This fringe urban could be the edge of any mid-size town, the gas station and the motels." It turned out to be Burbank. "You're talking about the setting for a story where a character wakes up and doesn't know where the hell he is. There's a widespread American story about trying to place yourself in this very anonymous environment. That's kind of exciting. To me, that's like a guy out of film noir."

Nolan takes noir's stock icons — the motel room, the gun in the drawer, characters who may or may not include a white knight driven by vengeance, a femme fatale, and a cop gone bad — and throws them into a valley of the mind, wraps them into a tale told by an amnesiac. "I took those familiar tropes," Nolan says, "and combined them with an unusual point of view."

Nolan, of course, is not the only contemporary artist to extend noir — a film tradition that, somehow, has failed to produce moneymaking films despite decades of creative ferment. The movie *Blade Runner* (and the Philip K. Dick novel on which it was based) put the stoic, isolated private eye in a futuristic Pacific Rim city teeming with runaway robots. Walter Mosley's novels, beginning with *Devil in a Blue Dress*, took Raymond Chandler's conventions to 1940s black L.A.; Paul Auster animated his *City of Glass* trilogy with postmodern theory and linguistic trickery. More recently, Jonathan Lethem's novel *Motherless Brooklyn* made its questing Philip Marlowe a foul-mouthed hood with Tourette's syndrome.

Amnesia, too, has long served as the basis for fiction and film. A new anthology on memory loss — *The Vintage Book of Amnesia* — points out that the device is used everywhere from old *Mission Impossible* episodes and the purplish noirs of Cornell Woolrich to literary fiction by Martin Amis, Walker Percy, and Donald Barthelme. (Noir writers may have been drawn to amnesia for the same reason they set their stories on the West Coast: A person with a short memory is like a city with a short history, perfect for false identities and deceptive appearances.) It was this literary heritage — and learning about anterograde memory loss in his psych class — that piqued the interest of Jonah Nolan. "It's almost a whole genre unto itself," he says of amnesia. It was this tradition he hoped to invert as surely as his brother inverted the film noir.

"The only useful definition of narrative I've ever heard is 'the controlled release of information,'" Nolan says.

The idea for the story started with a visual image: "A guy who wakes up in a motel room, and looks in a mirror. And has tattoos all over his body. And he sees a tattoo that says 'John G. raped and killed your wife.' The typical noir conceit," Jonah says, "is that he's an ordinary guy who's been wronged. And it's the standard amnesia moment. In an amnesia film or amnesia story, you wake up covered in blood. Here he woke up covered in tattoos. It suggests you've missed a whole chapter of your life."

Thanks to a strong showing at festivals — Venice, Toronto, and, most recently, Sundance — and the success of its European release, a critical consensus has already formed around *Memento*, and the film has developed a reputation as "this year's *Being John Malkovich*." But like *Croupier*, the entrancing Mike **continued on page 16**

Jeremy Theobald in Nolan's intriguing debut film, *Following*

Indie Angst

continued from page 15

Hodges mood piece that was eventually picked up for release by the Shooting Gallery company, the film has been passed over by the major indie distributors.

Soderbergh stated in a recent issue of *Film Comment* magazine that "when a film like Chris Nolan's *Memento* cannot get picked up, to me independent film is over. It's dead." The director is certainly onto something: that independent film, especially since *Pulp Fiction* introduced the indie blockbuster, has been less risky, more conventional, and far safer than it should be. (Soderbergh himself suffered from the genre's constriction early in his career.) Despite *Memento's* settling into a secure distribution deal, Soderbergh is hardly more sanguine.

"It makes me concerned that independent distributors don't want to work hard," he says. "They're searching for the indie equivalent of a slam dunk. I know that on every level now it's more expensive to release a movie, even on the independent level. But I think there's always a way to sell a good movie. And this one is not esoteric — it's a murder mystery!"

The ever cool Nolan is not troubled by his film's outcome. He doesn't feel stung that a buyer with deep pockets — or a distributor that could move the film more widely — never showed up: "I have never looked for any kind of external validation for the filmmaking process; if I had I would have given up a long time ago. The point is to get the film made, get it out of my head, get it off the page, get it on the screen." It's important to find the right people to work with, he says, so once the deal with Newmarket was made, "I breathed a tremendous sigh of relief."

Joe Pantoliano, a veteran character actor (*Risky Business*, *Bound*, *The Matrix*) who plays Teddy, the wormy friend of Pearce's amnesiac, is still burned. Last year, he says, he was at the Independent Spirit Awards — the indie Oscars — and was besieged by compliments from people at major independent distributors, including Miramax, New Line, Dimension, and USA Films. "People were coming up to me and saying, 'We just saw *Memento*, it's your best work, it's a fantastic movie.' I said, 'Are you gonna buy it?' They said, 'No.' They thought it was a movie that would never find an audience." In other words, it was exactly the kind of film an indie would have snapped up 5 or 10 years ago and tried to break.

"The independent film thing is bullshit," says Pantoliano. "They [the studios] all want to find a five-dollar bill, buy it for a dollar, and sell it for ten." The cheapness of indie studios, he says, comes from their having lost money on hyped Sundance movies such as *The Spitfire Grill* and *Happy, Texas*. "There were fights in restaurants over these movies," he says.

Nevertheless, now that *Memento* has been picked up by Newmarket, people like Peter Broderick, president of First Look Films — the Independent Film Channel affiliate that helped fund *Following*'s last stages — sees reason for hope. The best thing for a filmmaker, Broderick says, is to find a good fit with a distributor — whether a microdistributor like Newmarket or a traditional indie — that can push a movie with passion and creativity.

"If *Memento* does well, in the same way that *Croupier* is doing well, it says to distributors, 'This audience is out there. We have to find a link to those enthusiastic viewers.'" Nolan's movie, he says, could come from left field the way *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Blair Witch Project* did. "When a *Memento* comes along and gets the press attention that it has, and the business I think it will get, it's a hopeful sign. It says that formulaic studio movies are not the only game in town. It means that people can make the distinction between something tired and something fresh. It's reassuring."

Memento's cast and crew have lost countless hours arguing over what really happens in the movie. "I've seen it five times," says Carrie-Anne Moss who is, after all, *in* the movie, "and I've seen it differently each time."

Nolan, for his part, won't tell. When asked about the film's outcome, he goes on about ambiguity and subjectivity, but insists he knows the movie's Truth — who's good, who's bad, who can be trusted and who can't — and insists that close viewing will reveal all. "What you're seeing here," he says, passing his hand over his blank expression like a magician who's made a swallow appear in a top hat, "is my poker face."

Nolan wrote the script straight through — beginning with the first scene, which takes place last in time, and ending with the last, which takes place earlier — and was never tempted to lay the film out chronologically. "People were asking me to do that, and I always refused," he says.

He has all kinds of theories about film technology shaping film art. He was deeply influenced, he says, by growing up in the early days of VHS. "We're the last generation who remembers a time when you couldn't record television, you couldn't control time like that," he says. "We remember that shift. So I was very conscious of it growing up, and very conscious of it now that I see movies multiple times."

He's not, he says, the only one. Other filmmakers of his generation choose a story's structure more freely, finding something that best suits the story "rather than always insisting on chronology." Nolan points out that narrative trickery goes back at least as far as *Citizen Kane* (1941) but that storytelling became a flat, straight line for decades afterward.

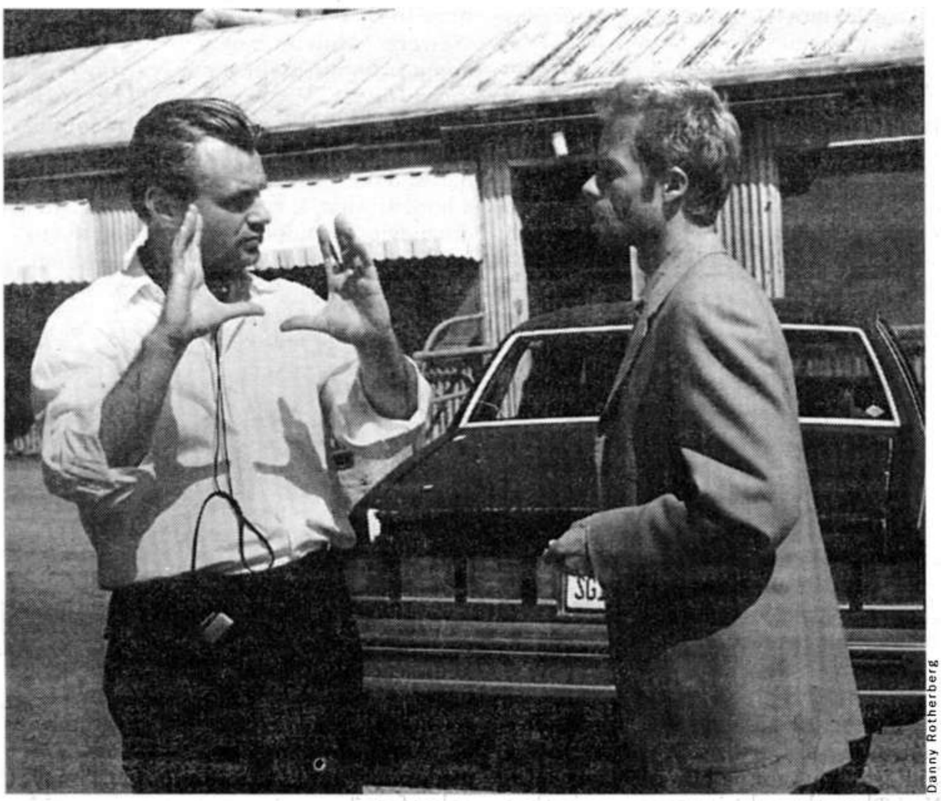
"When a film like *Memento* cannot get picked up, to me independent film is over. It's dead." — director Steven Soderbergh

"That was an *enormously* adventurous movie," he says, slipping into animated-professor mode. "What the hell happened? I think what happened is TV. TV is the most intensely linear format, and it's become the primary ancillary market for motion pictures. So you've got to create something where someone can start watching 10 minutes late, and still absorb the whole thing over an hour on TV."

But now, not only are people likely to watch movies repeatedly, they'll do it on forms like DVD and other new technologies, which audiences can manipulate. "A director of my generation is much freer to jump around, and give people information in short bursts." This, he says, is only fair since he has years to work on a film while an audience has only two hours in which to watch it. "So it should have layers," he says. "It should have a cinematic density that rewards subsequent viewings."

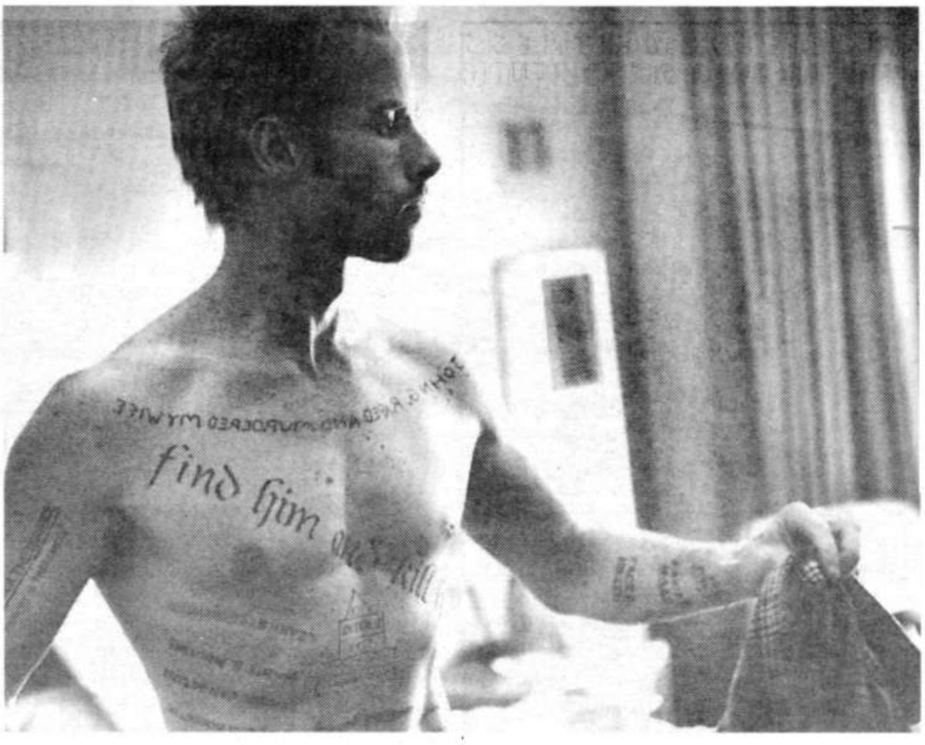
Soderbergh isn't the only young director fragmenting narrative, he says. "Ten years from now," says Nolan, "it's going to be pathetically obvious what we're all doing." Broderick mentions David Gordon Green's unconventionally structured *George Washington* as proof that Nolan is in good company.

Curiously, though Nolan's reputation is as a no-budget director, he sees himself as a mainstream filmmaker in the line of Alfred Hitchcock and Nicolas Roeg. In fact, as he waits for the American release of *Memento*, he is in Vancouver shooting a Warner Bros. remake of *Insomnia*, a 1997 Norwegian thriller that stars Al Pacino. He's also set to direct another mystery, *The Keys to the Street*, for Fox Searchlight, which he's adapted from a book by the popular novelist Ruth Rendell. Nolan doesn't intend to spend his entire career making crime films, but thinks the genre suits him — and not just because it is so naturally visual. "For a young filmmaker it's a great genre. It draws on your real-life neuroses, your real-life paranoia, your real-life fears," he says. "And extends them and takes them to the realm of melodrama so they become universal. I think particularly it's a good genre when you're younger — unless you want to make films about college grads looking for a job, or trying to get into the film busi- **continued on page 18**



Danny Rotherberg

Christopher Nolan (left) and Guy Pearce on the set of *Memento*



Ensuring memory: Guy Pearce as the tattooed amnesiac in *Memento*

Indie Angst

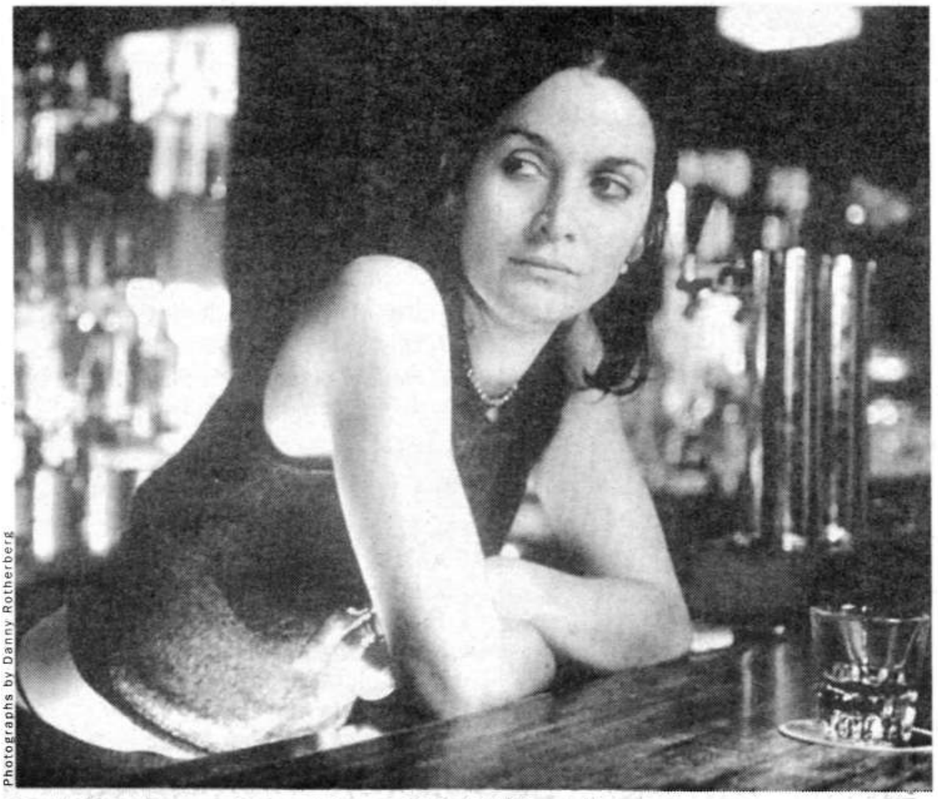
continued from page 17

ness. Which I don't particularly."

One of the keys to Nolan's success, clearly, is his way with actors, and the atmosphere he creates on set. "He's incredibly calm and relaxed, and appears confident," says Moss; his comfortable tone made her and the other actors trust themselves to take chances. Pearce — slight, shy, and puckishly Australian in person, more a Dickensian cutpurse than a Hollywood heartthrob — echoes Moss. "Chris is a highly intelligent guy, very respectful of what actors do," he says. "I've worked with directors before who think you're a piece of meat, and I think, 'Ah, I don't have the technical ability to do this.'" Pearce appears in nearly every scene of the film, in a very demanding role. "I thought it was going to be a really wonderful challenge. And I bashed my way through it and boggled my way through [the script], making sure Chris and I were on the same page. And when I came out the other side of it, just after we started shooting, it felt quite buoyant. It just flowed."

Soderbergh, whose *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* in 1989 made him one of the first independent auteurs, thinks young filmmakers should be wary of getting pigeonholed as indie guys. "In this day and age it's becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a career doing only independent films," he says. "And if you do, you become marginalized very quickly. There are fewer independent distributors, and those that are still around are more and more conservative." He could see Nolan going in any direction. "I think he's very pragmatic — and he's interested in engaging an audience, on his own terms."

Says brother Jonah: "I think he's enjoying being able to make movies on a grander scale. But he would make movies no matter what. He's the only person I know who's doing what he said he would be doing at eight years old. It's great that he's being celebrated. But if his luck dries up he'll keep on making films."



Photographs by Danny Rotherberg

Carrie-Anne Moss as *Memento*'s possibly helpful barmaid