From the Leverett House Grill to a wide array of scones, sandwiches, and more

from the start," she says. "We were there at the right time, in the right place."

In cooking, recipes are more or less guidelines, but in baking, precision rules. "There's a formula: 500 grams of flour, 300 grams of butter," Chang says. "Pastries are very meticulous and detail-oriented. Baking powder is chemistry. And once you finish baking a cake, you can't add a tablespoon more of this or that." If Chang wants to add a menu item—say, a chocolate-zucchini muffin—she first reviews Flour's current muffin recipes and those from other cookbooks. "Then I'll tweak it to my liking—maybe more zucchini, less chocolate, moister, with a tighter crumb. We try the recipe a few times till we get what we like, then scale it up."

Outside the kitchen, Chang reviews cookbooks, writes on pastry for *Fine Cooking* magazine, and works on her own cookbook, featuring items from Flour. Her fiancé is Boston restaurateur Christopher Myers, G '90, a co-owner of Radius, Via Matta, and Great Bay. Despite her high-calorie surroundings, Chang stays trim, partly due to a counterbalancing passion for distance running—she has competed in every Boston Marathon but one since 1991.

Moving Pictures, Hard Questions

A film cycle from San Francisco's Tenderloin

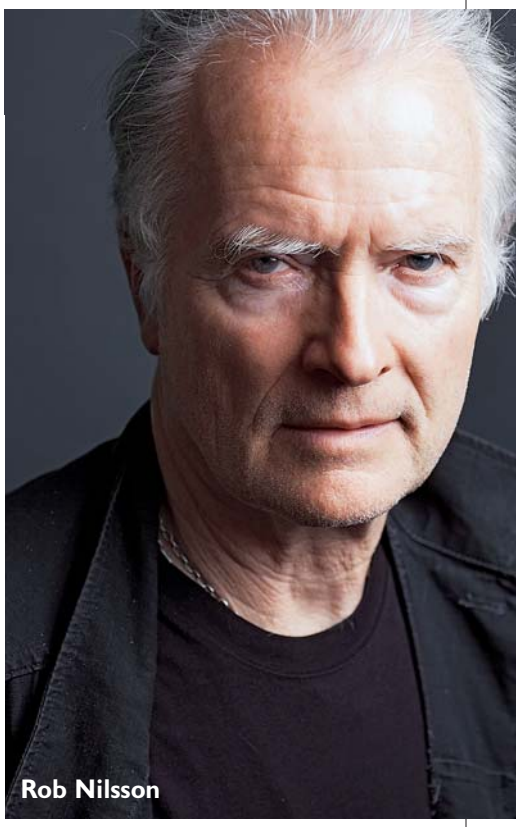
by HOWARD AXELROD

It was a rare rainy night in Los Angeles. Filling up his tank at a local gas station, a man noticed the silhouette of another man, just beyond the gas station's overhang, getting drenched. The two struck up a conversation. The second said he was a novelist, adding that he always carried his work with him. With that, his hand dripping, he brought out a small metal box from inside his jacket, filled with index cards. The first man began to finger his way through. But every card was the same: blank, except for one letter, the same letter, written in the middle of each card.

This may sound suspiciously like the opening scene from a movie, but it's an event from the life of award-winning independent filmmaker Rob Nilsson '61. The "novelist" in the story is Nilsson's brother, Greg, a homeless man, who had gone missing more than 10 years prior to that rainy night in Los Angeles. The man who found him, a good Samaritan who would take Greg in, eventually located Rob Nilsson two years later.

At the time, Nilsson, a winner at the Cannes and Sundance Film Festivals, was running an acting workshop for street people and aspiring actors (some of the attendees were both) in a warehouse in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. The continuing workshop has resulted in nine feature films, comprising the 9@Night cycle that was presented this past fall at the Harvard Film Archive. Using largely untrained actors and operating on a shoestring budget, Nilsson has burrowed into the shadows of the down and out: *Need* portrays the desperation of workers in the sex trade; *Scheme C6* follows a charismatic homeless man, equipped only with a motorcycle, a toothbrush, and an ill-fated plan. In these films the scenes are unscripted and the dialogue improvised by the actors, though the director himself works from "story scenarios."

Since his graduation from Harvard, Nilsson's aspirations have shifted from po-



DAVID FENTON

Rob Nilsson

etry—he cites the Grolier Bookstore (see "Grolier Reincarnated," November-December 2006, page 30) and the 1960s folk scene in Cambridge as early influences, along with a visit to Conrad Aiken, who was then living on Cape Cod—to painting (which he still pursues), to making movies. "Filmmaking, in the end, was the one thing where I could use all the other arts," he says. After stints with the Peace Corps in Nigeria—where his interest in filmmaking began as a lark with friends—and as a cab driver in Boston, Nilsson gained public attention in 1979 with his very first feature film, *Northern Lights.* That low-budget drama, focused on the Nonpartisan League, a populist movement that rallied the farmers of North Dakota in 1916, won the Camera d'Or at Cannes. Nilsson was 40. After a fallow period, he released *Heat and Sunlight* in 1988, a portrayal of a faltering love affair that took the Grand Prize at Sundance.

As his films attest, Nilsson—who looks a little bit like a street version of Clint Eastwood—is less interested in art as escapism than in art that bears witness, that gives some sense of "the way the world seems to be." And one inescapable part of that was his brother, a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic. In the early 1990s, driving through San Francisco's Tenderloin every day on the way to his editing room, Nilsson couldn't help but be reminded of his missing brother by the people he saw on the street corners. The district, heavily populated by drug addicts, sex workers, and the generally down and out, is typically described the same way as Nilsson's

FOLIO

Not Groucho (but Way Funny)

For a long time, Patricia Marx '75 assumed she "would wake up in the suburbs with three kids and a mother hairdo." It hasn't worked out that way. She remains single and childless, lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and writes humorous books, scripts, and magazine pieces, including columns on shopping for the *New Yorker.* Some of her best friends are people she met at the Harvard Lampoon, a group that reinforced her conviction that "being funny is the most important thing, maybe the only thing that matters."

She has acted on that premise as a writer for the TV shows *Saturday Night Live* and *Rugrats,* a writer of seven screenplays (all sold but none, as yet, produced), and as author of more than a dozen books: children's books such as *Now Everybody Really Hates Me,* adult titles like *How to Regain Your Virginity* and *You Can Never Go Wrong by Lying and Other Solutions to the Moral and Social Dilemmas of Our Time,* and collaborations with various other artists and humorists (Roz Chast of the *New Yorker,* for example) on the 1003 series (*1003 Great Things About Teachers,…About Getting Older,* etc.). These last make good bathroom reading; "If there were no bathrooms," Marx explains, "I'd have no career." And last January, Scribner published her first novel, *Him Her Him* Again *the End of Him,* a hip, funny examination of a woman's decade-long obsession with Mr. Wrong.

Patricia Marx

Photograph by Robert Adam Mayer

Meanwhile, her *New Yorker* shopping pieces bring a comic slant to the consumer's sidewalk safari. "For anyone struggling to overcome shopper's block during the holiday season," she declared in last year's Christmas-gift column, "there can be no hope of getting Jesus Christ's birthday postponed."

Born in the Philadelphia suburb of Abington, Marx was blessed with two "witty" parents who, she says, "didn't give me a bedtime or care what I ate." In a way, her father's office-supply business explains why she started writing: "There were so many Magic Markers around." The Marxes—no relation to Groucho or Karl, she insists—were a family of readers, and her dad also played the piano, a fact, she adds, that "instilled in me a great hatred for music." In general, though, she had "a pretty happy childhood. Now I'm mad at my parents for that—no good material."

In school, Marx was "that person you hate, the one sitting in the back row making fun of the teacher, who secretly does the extra-credit project." Yet that strategy got her into Harvard, where she concentrated in social studies, breakfasted daily on eight glasses of Tab, and became one of the first women elected to the Lampoon. "Being the only female around made me a mascot, which, I'm ashamed to say, was fine with me," she admits. "I don't think I opened my mouth for four years in college; there were too many funny people and I didn't think I could utter a line as funny as theirs. But I did write a lot."

By senior year, in terms of careers, she had "ruled out everything," and so decamped for King's College, Cambridge, on a National Science Foundation fellowship ("I was a mistake"). Marx did not complete her doctorate. ("All I have to show for it is a lot of cashmere sweaters," she says.) In 1979 she returned to New York City to write for *Saturday Night Live,* and has remained in Manhattan since. The city has treated her well; she had the good fortune, for example, to housesit a six-story mansion on upper Fifth Avenue for 15 years, a place where she led a "Holly Golightly life" and sometimes rollerbladed from room to room.

Now she has moved a few blocks away, and she continues to write and shop. ("These shopping pieces are exhausting," she says. "You have to walk around so much. The older I get, the more I like to sit down.") A preference for sitting is one reason she likes writing novels—she's working on her second one now. "I hate not to complain," Marx says of *Him Her Him* Again *the End of Him,* "but it was a joy to write." —C.L.

OPEN BOOK

Postmodern Medicine

We are all "medical citizens," embedded as potential or actual patients, with physicians, in a system of social, moral, and organizational understandings. So writes Monrad professor of the social sciences Charles E. Rosenberg in *Our Present Complaint: American Medicine, Then and Now* (Johns Hopkins, $50; $19.95 paper), touching on sources of unease.

Disease has become a bureaucratic—and, thus, social and administrative—as well as biological and conceptual—entity.

What do I mean when I describe disease as a "social entity"? I refer to a web of practice guidelines, disease protocols, laboratory and imaging results, meta-analyses, and consensus conferences. These practices and procedures have over time come to constitute a seemingly objective and inescapable framework of disease categories, a framework that increasingly specifies diagnostic criteria and dictates appropriate therapeutic choices. In America's peculiar hybrid health-care system, layers of hospital and managed care administrators enforce these disease-based guidelines. The past generation's revolution in information technology has only exacerbated and intensified these trends—in parallel with the research and marketing strategies of major pharmaceutical companies.... This web of complex relationships has created a new reality for practitioners and patients alike. Physicians have had their choices increasingly constrained—if, in some ways, enhanced. For the sick, such ways of conceptualizing and treating disease have come to constitute a tangible aspect of their illness experience.

SPL/PHOTO RESEARCHERS, INC.

Premodern medicine: doctor bleeding patient, in an 1804 English caricature by James Gillray.

Of course, every society has entertained ideas about disease and its treatment; patients have never been blank slates.... Think of the generations of sufferers who were bled, sweated, puked, or purged to balance their humors. But never has the infrastructure of ideas, practices, thresholds, and protocols that comes between agreed-upon knowledge and the individual patient been so tightly woven and bureaucratically crafted....

Yet, as I have emphasized, we are left with that inconveniently subjective object, the patient—in whose body these abstract entities manifest themselves. This is the characteristic split screen that faces today's clinician: the tension between illness in the individual patient and disease as crystallized and made socially real in the laboratory's and the epidemiologist's outputs and inscriptions, practice guidelines, and algorithms.... Bedside, clinic, and physician's office are the points at which the mandates of best—and increasingly most economically rational—practice bump up against the unique reality of the individual patient and challenge the physician's traditional autonomy....

It engenders a feeling of paradox, the juxtaposition of a powerful faith in scientific medicine with a widespread discontent at the circumstances in which it is made available. It is a set of attitudes and expectations postmodern as well as quintessentially modern.

ELENA DORFMAN

films: gritty and raw. "It was probably an area I feared more than anything else, because I didn't know not to be afraid of it," he says. But he began to explore, to get out of his car, and to begin searching again for his brother.

At the time, the director was developing a film about a homeless Vietnam veteran, a role Danny Glover had signed on to play. To secure extras, Nilsson and two former students from film classes he'd taught at San Francisco State University created the Tenderloin workshop, recruiting participants primarily from halfway houses. But the movie fell through—Nilsson couldn't get funding, and Glover took a role as a homeless man in another film. "So we had this ongoing workshop, which we were thinking was going to be preparing our secondary cast," Nilsson says, "and it became the heart of our work for the next 14 years."

Those films are often difficult to watch: the subject matter is grave, rarely leavened by humor, and the improvised scenes can hit dead ends. But other scenes are unforgettable. In *Need*, for instance, an aging prostitute, considering suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge, is interrupted by the headlights of a car at the bridge's edge. She walks closer, into the lights, until she sees that the driver is not a cop, but simply a lonely man who has come to drive golf balls into the Bay. And it is unclear what is more painful—the mask of despair she has been wearing, or the momentary fracturing of that mask.

Also memorable is *Chalk*, a pool-hall story that features Nilsson's brother, who

Nilsson and actors on location

came to live with the director in Berkeley after the good Samaritan call came from Los Angeles. "Never been a worse actor," Nilsson says with humor and evident love. "We're doing a scene, and he's just *watching* it. We're saying, 'Greg, you're *in* the scene.'"

Nilsson's movies are not easy to find—distribution continues to be a challenge—but perhaps even less visible is the work he's accomplished in the workshops themselves. "In the street," he explains, "the thing that you have to give up first, because you have to protect yourself, is strong emotion." Working with people who have often gone invisible, not just to others, but in fundamental ways to themselves, Nilsson asks the workshop participants to let go of some of their defenses, if only for a time, through acting exercises. "I'm not asking you for your life," he says, "I'm asking you for the hate, or for the love—for the feeling." While Nilsson admits his approach may be "a little Californian," the workshops have led to some very powerful moments; and the emotion of those moments often carries into the films themselves.

The director can't remember the letter his brother wrote on those index cards, but he says that, over the years, he's always thought of it as Y. The small jump to the word "Why?" is not lost on him. And yet, movie after movie, Nilsson seems to be asking the more poignant question "How?" How do people, marginalized for whatever reason, manage to get along?

Howard Axelrod '95 is writing a memoir.