



RETR DUCK

Oscar-Winning Duck

Last week the Oregon football team finished daily doubles and now can savor a little more rest with just one

practice a day. Academy Award-winning production designer and Duck football letterman (1967-69) knows all about daily doubles from his football days and compares that experience to making movies. Gassner was the production designer for "Road to Perdition" starring Paul Newman and Tom Hanks. Gassner finished his work on the film in the spring of 2001 and had this to say about it: "Road to Perdition" was a fusion of all the work that I've done. It was a wonderful collaboration where everyone was involved. It was the hardest movie that I've ever done. It was incredibly intense. Imagine daily doubles every day for a year." Gassner won the production design Oscar in 1991 for "Bugsy" starring Warren Beatty. But the road to Hollywood fame was anything but easy. Dennis sees a close correlation between his days as a "Fighting Duck" playing for head coach Jerry Frei and designing a multi-million dollar movie. "Playing the game contributed so much to the career that I've had," Gassner related.

Dennis Gassner entered the University of Oregon in 1967 from David Douglas High School along with teammates Cam Sinclair, and Joe Phillips. "On an intellectual level I wanted to be an architect but it was just too difficult to play football and be an architect. Then I thought, 'well, I'll be an artist and then, all of a sudden, I found film where you're combining all the elements.'" He took a film class at the U of O and made a couple of small Super 8 movies. In the meantime Dennis starred as a defensive end for the Ducks and his intensity in football has also carried over to his vocation. Defensive coach Norm Chapman described the 6' 0", 198 lb. Gassner this way: "...a good guy, a real team player who was one of the best defensive ends to ever play at Oregon, possessing tenacity and quickness. Dennis played the stand-up defensive end position in a 5 man front and he couldn't be knocked off his feet. He was a hard-nosed hitter and on the field

he was a mean, vicious guy. You didn't want to be a quarterback when Dennis Gassner took the option."

Case in point was October of 1968 against Ohio State at Columbus. Buckeye quarterback Rex Kern ran down the line on an option and Gassner made him pay with a powerful hit that knocked Kern out cold. On the way down the elevator at halftime the Ohio State assistants complained about Gassner's hit and Chapman told them "that's the name of the game" and informed them that's what happens when you use an option quarterback. Teammate Brad Halverson described Dennis as an "unassuming stud" who had a great ability to "uncoil his body" and deliver big hits.

Although teammates and coaches remember that hit at Ohio State, Gassner said his football memories are a "blur." But one of his more focused memories was playing #1-ranked USC at Autzen in 1968. Gassner, knew what Trojan quarterback Steve Sogge was going to do on a certain play. "I saw the play develop and Sogge fake and I knew where they were going. If I had moved to go for the interception it would have been an interesting footrace. I backed off, just watched the play develop and tackled him. But there was that little moment when you look back and say 'I should have' and it would have been clear sailing."

Gassner said that all of his coaches at Oregon were "terrific" and he was especially impressed by John Robinson. "He was always the greatest influence. He had a way with people philosophically that made you want to work for him. Jerry Frei was a great coach and was kind of stoic in his manner and let his assistants do a lot more of the psychologically oriented work. Robinson had an enthusiasm and a way of endearing himself with the players. He could yell but with humor and a twinkle in his eye to get you to go further.

After Dennis "found film" at the

U of O he graduated with a degree in political science and moved to Portland, married, and had a child. Gassner applied and was accepted to the Art Center of College Design in Los Angeles. He studied there for two years and while there he met a fellow student named Doug Clayborne. After graduation Clayborne was hired by Francis Ford Coppola to work on "Apocalypse Now" and in turn Clayborne was able to add Gassner to his production team. Gassner's job was to design the dossier material. "I worked like a maniac and it was a frightening experience to stand before the prestigious group of Coppola, Melinda Matheson, and Michael Hare and to be told that the dossier material was going to be the main thread for 'Apocalypse Now'." In the movie there is a scene where a New York Times newspaper article is seen. Dennis asked Coppola for advice on what fictitious by-line name should be used in that scene. Coppola told Gassner to use his (Dennis') name! Gassner said he "freaked out" when he saw the final cut and "Dennis Gassner" about 14 feet high on the screen. Gassner said he was sitting next to the president of the film company who nudged him and said, "you got a bigger credit than Francis!" "I was a nobody at that time. I wasn't even a member of the union and I was just the guy who designed the dossier," said Gassner. However, his foot was in the door and more doors began to open wide for him.

Gassner's special interest in film work led him into production design. "I get a script, and I have to turn the words on a page into visuals. The director and I will talk about the emotion of the scene and what the characters are like. Who are these characters, where do they live and what is their environment like? I create all the visuals you see on the screen and the director of photography lights them and puts his emotional lighting into my emotional environment." Eventually Dennis got to work with Dean Tavoularis, the designer of "The Godfather" films. He mentored Gassner for 5 years and Dennis considers him to still be the best designer in the world. "He showed me the way into the business, in an artistic political fashion," said Gassner.

Gassner said he eventually got "kicked out of the nest" and he designed his first picture, a small million dollar film, "The Hitcher" in 1986. It was critically well received and started a chain reaction that led to much larger films such as "Field of Dreams" in 1989, "The Grifters" and "Miller's Crossing" in 1990 and "Bugsy" with Warren Beatty in 1991. Some of his notable films are "Barton Fink", "Waterworld", "The Truman Show", "O Brother Where Art Thou", and "Road to Perdition". Dennis won the British Academy Award for "The Truman Show". Gassner has rubbed elbows with such notables as Marlon Brando, Martin Sheen, Kevin Costner, John Goodman, Jim Carrey, and many others. He said that actors who have reached that level have usually struggled (e.g. Carrey lived in his car for two years)

and really don't have ego problems. Because of the nature of the business he thinks that the "problem people" fall by the wayside before they can even become famous. He says that everyone is in the business together and whoever comes forward with the right thing at the right time realizes success.

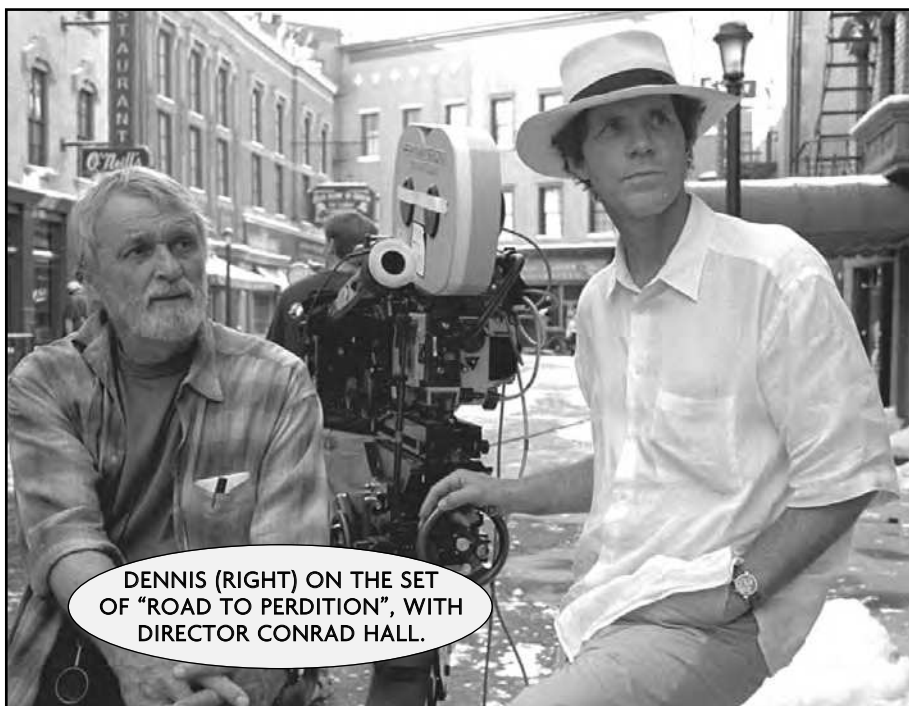
For Gassner the Hollywood scene is not one of glamour. "I work and



DENNIS WAS A STANDOUT DEFENSIVE END FROM 1967- 69.

I go home and sleep. A pretty normal life. The fun part is at the end when you get to see a movie that is interesting." I asked him if "O Brother Where Art Thou" was a fun movie to do. "It was hard. None of the movies are fun to do. They're all hard to do. You get up everyday and you work your ass off. I haven't stopped playing football. I'm in the film business, but I'm still playing football. It's artistic, you're part of a team, you play a long game for about a year and then you get to play another one. So it does translate itself in an interesting way." Despite the hard work Dennis looks forward to more movies. "In this business I try to challenge myself to the next level. So, every picture I do I look for something that is going to challenge me so I don't get bored. And that's the exciting part. I'm lucky enough that I've put myself in the position where I get offers for interesting projects." Now he is working on "Big Fish" with Tim Burton (Batman), with whom he has always wanted to work. The timing and conditions have come together on this picture which Dennis describes as "a fantasy, a kind of combination of "Forrest Gump" and the "Wizard of Oz".

Gassner has not been back to Autzen since his last game in 1969 but he's more aware now of what the Ducks are doing. When he was working on "Waterworld" in Hawaii a producer knowing that Gassner had played at Oregon, informed him that the Ducks were going to the Rose Bowl. Gassner said his first reaction was thinking that he was having an acid flashback! Dennis plans on working "as long as he can keep moving." He remarked: "what am I going to do, retire? Retire and do what?" Dennis' is married, lives in Hollywood, California, and has a daughter from his first marriage who also works in the business. O



DENNIS (RIGHT) ON THE SET OF "ROAD TO PERDITION", WITH DIRECTOR CONRAD HALL.

Photo courtesy: Dreamworks Pictures