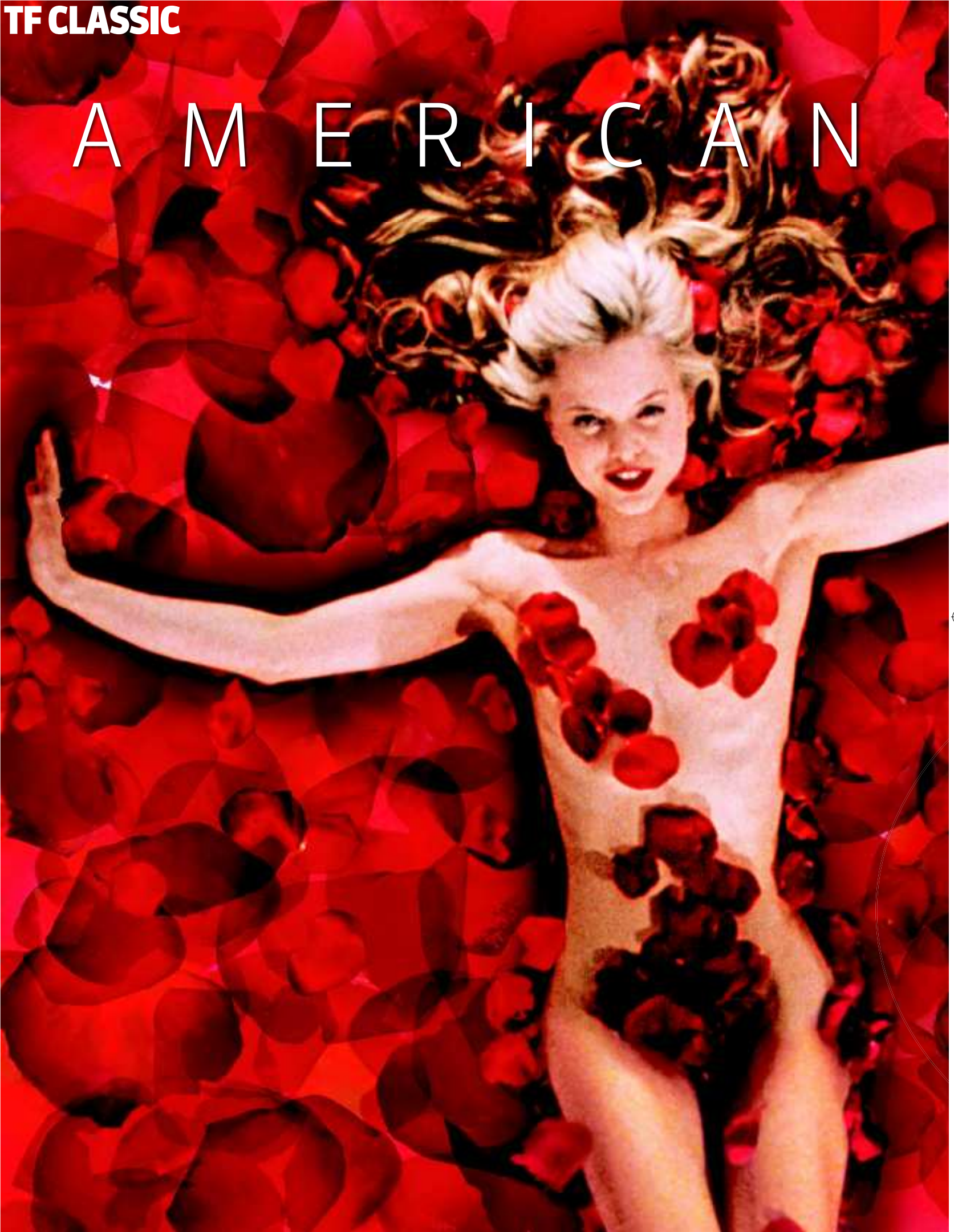


TF CLASSIC

# A M E R I C A N



# BEAUTY

How did an English first-time director make one of the most beautiful American films of the '90s? Sam Mendes, Kevin Spacey and co revisit the 'burbs...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

## AMERICAN DREAMS

**ALAN BALL (screenwriter)** I started writing it as a play but the idea always rattled around in my brain as a movie. There were several inspirations. I was fascinated by the [Long Island Lolita] Amy Fisher trial. I felt like the real story underneath the media hype was way more fascinating and tragic than what we could see. In the first draft of *American Beauty*, there's a big media trial in which Ricky and Jane are being tried for Lester's murder. I also had an encounter with a plastic bag one day in front of the World Trade Center and I've had many jobs that I detested. A lot of Lester's story came from direct personal experience.

**DAN JINKS (producer)** It was the best screenplay that either one of us had ever read. It was incredibly funny on one hand, yet quite moving on the other.

**BRUCE COHEN (producer)** Dan and I looked at each other and said, "Wow, I wonder if there will be studios brave enough to buy this." Spielberg read the script on a Saturday night and on Monday morning, he said, "The script's great, make it right away, don't change a thing."

**JINKS** A couple of things lead us to Sam. We went to see his production of *Cabaret* in New York and it was so unique and distinctive. He directed this stage musical like it was a movie.

**STEVEN SPIELBERG (DreamWorks co-founder)** The script was very, very compelling but when Sam got hold of it, he took it to a whole other level.

**SAM MENDES** *American Beauty* was unlike anything I had ever read before and you can't say that about many scripts. I had a pitch all prepared, about how the movie is about imprisonment and escape, and it's a journey of redemption, and it should be Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening. They bought what I was saying about the movie, but they wanted John Travolta or Bruce Willis, and they weren't sure about Annette either.

**KEVIN SPACEY** I knew Sam had turned down a bunch of movies before he accepted *American Beauty* so I was very curious what he held out for. We had our first meeting at the Old Vic bar and I knew within 35 seconds that we were absolutely on the same page.

**CHRIS COOPER** At first, I thought, "God, do I want to spend so much time in this character's head?" I started making excuses... I said, "This is such a negative script." Finally, my wife told me I was frightened of this script and chances are because you're frightened, that's the reason you should do this part. I knew immediately that she was right. >>



Square meal: the Burnham clan endures an uncomfortable dinner in *American Beauty*.

## STEALING BEAUTY

**SPACEY** Sam used the best devices in theatre to prepare us to get in front of those cameras. There was a two-week rehearsal period where we really got to examine and explore and test and try; in most movies you don't get that kind of luxury. You're lucky if you show up and rehearse in the morning before you start shooting.

**WES BENTLEY** Sam had to fight for those two weeks of rehearsals and what he got out of it was so strong in terms of a cast ensemble feeling.

**SPACEY** Sam and I always talked about the journey that Lester was on and how to map it out so that you never actually saw him change. There was never a moment where he suddenly changed; he *evolved*. That process with Sam was incredible because he just had this ability to shave things off. He was always trying to get the performance that he needed in the editing.

**BENTLEY** Sam's first concern was having a foundation for this movie — he knew how big a commentary on US society it was. A lot of people were surprised that he had such a great take on American suburban issues. I think that's the only way that this story could have been told is by someone with an outside perspective.

**'I THINK THIS STORY COULD ONLY HAVE BEEN TOLD BY SOMEONE WITH AN OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE'**

WES BENTLEY

## THORN IN THE SIDE

**SPACEY** I had no doubt in Sam. There was no moment where I thought, "Sam can't do this."

**MENDES** The first few days I shot were not very good. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it was crap. But it got better. And the studio was good enough to let me reshoot the first couple of days.

**SPIELBERG** The first few days were very scary. I was looking at Sam's footage, and I knew it wasn't going to cut together. I asked him to come over to my house, and we reviewed the footage together. In the end, he reshot the first three days, and from then on, he was perfect.

**BENTLEY** A lot of movie sets, they're parties — it's a party set or it's a boring set or it's a tense set. This one had no labels to it. There are no clever stories to be told

or pranks being played because everyone was just focused. We shot a 24-hour day once and even in that full 24-hour turn there wasn't one strange thing about the set — everyone was still so focused. I knew then that this was going to be special.

**THORA BIRCH** In lots of other films, I always say, "Kids don't really talk like that." But in this one, I was like, "No, I talk just like that. And it's sad."

**MENDES** We barely were able to shoot the scene where Annette wakes up to Kevin wanking. Annette could not stop laughing — the sound that Kevin's hand was making under the covers was too much for her. I also asked Kevin to find three different ways of describing wanking for every take, which of course made it even funnier for her.

**SPACEY** I said a whole string of different ones: peeling the carrot, milking the lizard, whatever. On Annette's last day, we strung them all together and made a video for her. [laughs]

**MENDES** Originally it was a pool of water that Mena was in above Kevin and then I turned it into a sea of roses, which was easier to get together and to shoot. We first shot it on high-speed camera with real rose petals being dropped from cranes and then we reversed the film. But the camera broke and I watched the dailies — the film was already damaged — and Mena was immobile. So thank god we were able to shoot it again because what makes it so beautiful is her motion. We were shooting six times slower than normal speed so she had to flap her arms up and down like a demented butterfly.

**BENTLEY** Chris Cooper is extremely intense and very dedicated to committing time to the characters. What we filmed was just a fraction of the energy between Frank Fitts and his son. My friend Jake Gyllenhaal did a movie called *October Sky* in which Chris played his dad. I saw it right after I finished *American Beauty* and there was one scene where Chris shows affection to Jake's character and I literally started crying. It wasn't in a weird Method actor, I'm-Ricky kind of way. I wasn't abused as a child, I have no idea what that feels like but I got something there so sad, so fucking desperate that only Chris could have made that happen in me. The



**Pay dirt:** Sam Mendes' view of American suburban life pulled in \$130m Stateside.

sense of loss I felt, the sense of what I never had, was so powerful that it just wiped me out. And that really comes across in the film.

## COME TOGETHER

**MENDES** Alan had written a multilayered script with a spiritual dimension. Then suddenly it turned into an episode of *NYPD Blue*. I took out the whole courtroom framework, where the kids were found guilty of Lester's murder — about 15 minutes. I wanted to let the loose ends dangle.

**BALL** I said it doesn't really work and you should put that stuff back in. Sam said,

"I totally disagree, it's not important," and we had words. The next day I saw it again with *all* of the ending removed, and it really worked. That other stuff worked on the page but not really on screen, because the movie that evolved was one that for all its darkness had a really romantic heart. It was hopeful and optimistic. And for those kids to go to jail for a crime they didn't commit, especially after seeing the heartbreaking performances of Wes and Thora, it was too cynical.

**MENDES** The movie you see is not the movie I thought I was shooting. I thought I was making a much more whimsical, comic story, kaleidoscopic, almost like a Coen brothers movie. And what I found in the cutting room was a much more emotional, haunting animal than I had imagined.

**SPACEY** I don't think I've cried so long and hard as when I saw the movie for the first time. And that scene with the plastic bag, to me, was everything the movie was about: "Don't miss *that* moment of your life." That scene just kills me. I hear Sam talk about how difficult it was to film. He was screaming at a plastic bag at six in the morning in a parking lot going, "Fucking move." It's hilarious, but to me that's what cinema can do.

**MENDES** I still count as the best moment of the whole process the moment that I first showed it to Steven. He likes to watch movies alone and so I was pacing up and down and finally I got word: "Steven's finished." I went in and he stood up and he had tears in his eyes and he said, "You've made a classic movie."

**SPIELBERG** It wasn't really the film I expected. I didn't expect as much raw truth and I also didn't expect as much humour... What Sam brought was a tremendous insight into the human condition. >>

**'I THOUGHT I WAS MAKING A WHIMSICAL, COMIC STORY - LIKE A COEN BROTHERS FILM'** SAM MENDES

## CLOSE-UP

Plot luck: last minute changes...



Few movies undergo the drastic retooling that Sam Mendes applied mere weeks before *American Beauty* was due for release. The British stage tyro shot Alan Ball's script almost word for word, including a prologue with the dead Lester Burnham flying down from

heaven. Falsely accused teenage lovers Ricky (Wes Bentley) and Jane (Thora Birch) were also shown losing their trial for his homicide, as Ricky's father Frank (Chris Cooper) frames them with the video in which Jane gabs about wanting her father dead. But in a bold, visionary move, Mendes sliced out the entire subplot — creating a classic in one fell swoop.

Not everyone embraced the radical alterations. "I felt like somebody had taken a sword and drawn it through my gut," said *Beauty's* late cinematographer Conrad Hall (pictured above) on first viewing, before the director won him over. As for Ball, he also pleaded with Mendes to reinstate the courtroom sequences before coming round. "I think when I wrote those scenes, I was really angry and that came out on the page," said Ball. "But [that subplot] just wasn't necessary." All that remains are the flying shots over suburbia, which Mendes left in as a running motif.



**Dead weights:** Lester's flying return from heaven in a bathrobe was cut as the plot shifted tone.

# TF CLASSIC

Buddying up: Bentley and Cooper spent a long time building their characters.

**'THEATRE LIVES IN THE MEMORY, BUT MOVIES LIVE AND BREATHE AND WALK AMONG US'**

SAM MENDES



Happy meal: Lester finds joy in a menial fast-food job.

**BENING** When we went to see the picture in this little screening room, I went with my husband [Warren Beatty], and when the movie ended, I just was like, "Oh my god, it works. It works. It works!" Just that feeling of... "Yeeeessss!"

**SPACEY** Ultimately, you can't imagine that a film will be as successful as this one was – that's the stuff you can't possibly ever know. I've done good films that didn't make money, so people call them failures but I think they're huge successes. I think we measure things too much on how much money a movie makes. The film world is littered with movies that are hugely successful films but they may not have made a lot of money. *American Beauty* was one of those that did both.

**JINKS** We realised very early on that kids were loving the movie and completely got the themes. We were like,

"Finally, here's a movie that has both generations in it in a really intelligent, thoughtful way, and people are responding to that."

**SPACEY** Winning the Oscar was the pinnacle of a remarkable journey on that particular movie and, for me, the pinnacle of a 12-year focus on trying to carve a film career out. It was pretty much right after that that I asked myself, "It's gone better than I could have hoped – what am I supposed to do now?" I mean what do you do with that? Do you just keep making movies, making money, trying to be on top? I thought, "No, I don't want that anymore, I want something else."

**MENDES** For two or three weeks after you win the Oscar, you learn what your name sounds like in consonants, when someone who recognises you whispers, 'Sm Mnds.' But then it goes. You become invisible again.

## BEAUTY'S SPOT

**MENDES** That was lightning in a bottle. To recreate the reasons for the success of *American Beauty* would be impossible. If you make *Bonnie And Clyde* 10 years later, it's not such a great movie. But where it sits – in 1967 – it's a cultural milestone. In my year, I thought *Election* was a great movie, and it didn't take off. That could have been the fate of *American Beauty*.

**BENTLEY** [Smiling] I am proud of the film. It's played such a big part in my life. I still get work off of that role and at the end of the day I'm thankful but I don't think people fully realise the impact of it. When something like that happens to you, there's a lot of baggage that comes along with it.

**SPACEY** All I know is that people still talk about it, people still refer to it, I still get letters about it and it's a film that people still think of with great affection.

**MENDES** Movies live and breathe and walk among us. I didn't truly realise that until I made *American Beauty*. Theatre lives in the memory, which can be very powerful, but it is not the same. A movie puts you in the centre of the culture. And that's the challenge – the game. You are playing for immortality. **TF**

## WHAT HAPPENED NEXT



### AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

While the movie stands firmly against the stifling conformity demanded by America's

consumerist society, our own high streets have been overrun by Gaps, Starbucks and the rest since 1999. Maybe the credit crunch will lead to the rebirth of individualism.



### SAM MENDES

As Mendes admits, *American Beauty* was "lightning in a bottle" and he's struggled since to make

such a bold cinematic statement. *Road To Perdition* and *Jarhead* are both fine – but nothing more. So the return to dark domestic drama with the upcoming *Revolutionary Road* looks like Mendes' attempt to recapture his mojo.



### KEVIN SPACEY

Winning his second Oscar sealed the title of 'Actor Of His Generation' for Spacey, but post-*Beauty* his heart just wasn't in it (the only

way to explain *Pay It Forward* and *K-PAX*). Which is why he decamped to London for his first love – theatre – and a 10-year stint as head of the Old Vic.



### PLAYING GAY

It's not easy being gay for Chris Cooper's super-repressed ex-Marine, who conceals his

true feelings under rampant homophobia. *Brokeback Mountain* moulded its gay characters in a similarly tortured vein (without the phobia) – but made them the leads in their story.



### YOOF CLUB

Wes Bentley, Thora Birch and Mena Suvari were outstanding in *Beauty* but it's a dog-eat-dog

world for young stars, and all have suffered mixed fortunes since. Recent/upcoming outings (*Cavegirl* for Birch, *P2* for Bentley, and straight-to DVD *Day Of The Dead* remake for Suvari) don't bode well for their long-term prospects.