When one thinks of film adaptations of Philip Roth's fiction, Larry Peerce's box office hit *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969), Robert Benson's star-studded *The Human Stain* (2003), or even Ernest Lehman's (tragically) ill-conceived version of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1972) immediately spring to mind. However, the first Roth story that attracted cinematic attention was not a critically acclaimed or best-selling novel. In fact, the first adaptation of Roth's work is based on a narrative that has never been collected and that most readers have never even heard of: “Expect the Vandals,” published in the December 1958 issue of *Esquire*. In most ways, it is an atypical Roth story, an account of two WWII GIs who survive an American landing on a Japanese-held island. The soldiers, Moe Malamud and Ken Moyer, hide out and observe the enemy forces from a distance, that is, until the day Moe witnesses the Japanese committing suicide en masse, an act that leaves both men dumbfounded. The two then have the entire island to themselves, experiencing both the pleasures and the anxieties that isolation brings, until they are rescued on the morning of 30 June 1946 by a group of American soldiers scouting the island. The next day, Ken and Moe stand on the deck of an observer ship while their island hermitage—which readers now realize is near Bikini Atoll—is subjected to an atomic blast. The short story caught the eye of screenwriter-director Joel Rapp, and the rest, albeit little known, is history.

Rapp was almost literally born into show business, the son of Philip Rapp (creator of the radio shows *The Bickersons* and *Baby Snooks*) and the godson of Fanny Brice and Eddie Cantor. He has written for both the large and small screens, with credits on such popular sitcoms as *Gilligan's Island*, *Bewitched*, *McHale's Navy*, *My Favorite Martian*, *Green Acres*, and *The Joey Bishop Show*. He also has become a horticultural guru, establishing his own indoor plant business in Hollywood, writing several best-selling books on indoor gardening and cooking, appearing for eleven years as Regis Philbin and Kathie Lee Gifford's TV gardener, and making a name for himself as “Mr. Mother Earth, Plant Man to the Stars.” Prior to this, he traveled with legendary producer Roger Corman to Puerto Rico, where he shot his adaptation of “Expect the
Vandals.” The result was *Battle of Blood Island* (1960) featuring Rapp as screenwriter and director. Rapp writes about his life in *Radio, TV, Mother Earth & Me* (BearManor Media, 2004, foreword by Roger Corman). I interviewed him about his experiences in adapting “Expect the Vandals,” shooting on location, and spending time with Roth discussing his fiction. What follows is the result of an email-based interview in summer 2005.

**Derek Parker Royal:** What was the impetus behind your choice to make *Battle of Blood Island*?

**Joel Rapp:** Back in 1958 or ’59, Roger Corman called and told me that he had a tax deal in Puerto Rico wherein he could make two or three pictures back to back and receive a terrific tax break. He intended to use the same crew to make all three, but with different actors, of course. He asked if I’d be interested in joining him and making one of the flicks. I was thrilled and began searching for a project that would meet the requirements and lo, within a couple of days after his phone call, I stumbled on “Expect the Vandals” in *Esquire*, read it, and loved it. Perfect for the requirements—set on an island, two guys mostly located in a cave, great adult dialogue—I figured correctly that it could be made for $35,000 or less. So I contacted Philip Roth’s agent, offered him a thousand bucks for the rights, he agreed, and that’s the genesis of the movie.

**DPR:** By the time that “Expect the Vandals” came out, Roth had already had a few stories published. Had you read him before, or was this your first exposure to his fiction?

**JR:** As far as I can recall, this was my first exposure to his fiction, and as I said, I came on the story strictly by accident. A friend lent me the issue of *Esquire*, and I took it from there. Time changes memory as you know, and quite honestly, I may have read *Goodbye, Columbus* (the collection) before I read “Expect the Vandals” and was already a fan, but I can’t say for sure. Obviously, I did read *Goodbye, Columbus* at some time, as I have read practically everything that Philip has written since. (Not all his short stories and other lesser known works, but all his major novels for sure. I was somewhat disappointed with *The Plot Against America*—I love “what if” premises, but frankly, I think he ran out of steam during the last quarter of the book.) The two or three reasons I chose to film “Expect the Vandals” were primarily the location, the tiny cast, and the writing, which I admired greatly. I was aware that he had been given a Houghton Mifflin literary fellowship, validating my opinion of his work somewhat—not that I needed validation—and in raising the money for the film, I used the sure-to-come fame of Philip Roth as a selling point. I would love nothing better than to spend a few hours with Philip now, reminiscing about all that’s gone between our first and only meetings, but unfortunately, that’s highly unlikely.

**DPR:** What were your experiences like with Roth at the time?

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**DPR:** What were your experiences like with Roth at the time?

**JR:** I first met Philip about ten days before we set off for Puerto Rico to shoot the film and spent almost a week with him, just the two of us. We spoke for hours and hours about our pasts and our hopes for the future—I
remember clearly that he was passionate about his writing, and, although somewhat modest, he admitted he dreamt that he would someday be recognized as a great author—but mainly I wanted to get his take on the piece, what sections he felt were most important, what sections he felt could be deleted if we needed the time, just so I could get a general feeling about the material from the author himself. I brought along a shooting script, which was most faithful to the story, and the two of us spent a lot of time going over it—switching scenes here and there, cutting dialogue, rewriting dialogue, that kind of thing. If you had the story to compare with the film, you’d find it turned out almost identical, scene for scene. (Except that horrendous phony opening that appears on one version of the DVD—a “battle” sequence that we shot down in Santa Monica with Japanese soldiers using fake rifles that didn’t even fire blanks. It was embarrassing, but Roger had sold the movie to Allied Artists, and they wanted that scene or something like it. I had no choice but to go along.) Philip and I spent a lot of time sitting out on the rocks by the ocean talking about life and lots of philosophy and politics. I think he lived out near the end of Long Island.

**DPR:** How involved was he in the filming?

**JR:** He was busy working and really had no need or desire to make the trip to Puerto Rico. When we finished filming, I called and asked him if he’d like to see a rough cut of the film—I could arrange a screening for him in New York—but he politely declined with some sort of message like, “I trust you entirely and am sure the film is fine.” For some strange reason, I remember an odd request either he or his agent made—he wanted his credit to read “Story by Philip M. Roth”—I don’t recall ever seeing any other work of his that included his middle name or initial. Anyway, although the visit was one of the most memorable moments of my life, that feeling came after he gained international fame, and I realized how lucky I had been to have spent all that time with him.
DPR: How much experience had you had at that point as a director and as a screenwriter?

JR: More than most twenty-three-year-old kids. I was born into a comedy-writing family—my father, Philip Rapp, was a legend in radio; he created *Baby Snooks* and *The Bickersons* among his myriad accomplishments. Soon after I graduated from USC in 1955 (with a major in telecommunications, in the first class to graduate with that major), my dad sold a show to TV called *Topper* (a Thorne Smith classic), and he let me write a few scripts for that show, with his guidance and editing, of course. Then he created a show called *The Adventures of Hiram Holliday*, which starred Wally Cox and aired only for one season, although it won a Peabody Award, and I wrote two or three scripts for that show. About then, I met a young agent who believed in my ability and told me he could get me a job at Ziv Productions writing a *Highway Patrol* episode. He was true to his word, and I spent the next couple of years working for Ziv and churning out the half-hour series that they produced, alternating shows with five or six other writers who all got the same pay: $700, Writers Guild of America minimum, per script. Then I met someday-to-be-legendary, low-budget producer Roger Corman, who was basically just starting out, we became friends, and he had an idea for a movie that he wanted me to write and direct [*High School Big Shot*]. It was a good idea; I wrote a good script—I did a hell of a job as a director considering it was my maiden effort, and I only had about $40,000 to work with—and went on to write a couple of cheapies for Roger when the Puerto Rican deal came along.

DPR: I’m sure that there are many potential pitfalls in adapting a piece of short fiction to the screen. What was the process like in writing the screenplay of *Battle of Blood Island*, and how much input in the adaptation process did Roth provide, if any?

JR: There are varying degrees of difficulty when it comes to adapting a screenplay from another medium. If one is adapting a novel, for instance, it becomes critical to decide what to take out and what to leave in because if you tried to do the whole thing, the movie would be four hours long. In a screenplay, you don’t have the luxury that a novelist has in being able to develop character through that character’s thoughts and complete backstory, so to divide the novel into three acts and still stay loyal to the spirit and the essence of the piece is not as easy as it may seem. Adapting a stage play is a different
problem, usually one of finding ways to take the picture “outside” without making it obvious that that’s all you are doing. You have to be very inventive in finding ways to take scenes that were specifically written to be played on a stage and putting them outside—that is what moviegoers must have (for the most part; Tennessee Williams’s plays, for instance, are very difficult to move outside). In the case of “Expect the Vandals,” the screenplay pretty much wrote itself, insofar as I merely added stage directions and a couple of scenes outside the cave. Adapting true short fiction. Turning James Thurber’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” on which my father worked, a two-page New Yorker piece, into a full-blown screenplay—well, that’s a horse of a different color. A lot of invention is required by the screenwriter; basically, the story simply becomes the blueprint for the picture. As for Philip Roth’s contribution and input, as I said earlier we spent quite a bit of time discussing the screenplay versus the story, and he made several suggestions, most of which I eagerly accepted. But quite frankly, because I had remained so totally faithful to the dialogue and situation, there wasn’t really a lot that he needed to add.

DPR: What were the most significant changes, deletions or additions, you made for the film adaptation?

JR: I just recently reread the story after forty-seven years. It was pretty much as I remembered, except I had forgotten that the Japanese suicides occurred so much earlier in the short story. As a result I had to write the first act from scratch, although I stole bits and pieces of Roth’s dialogue from the latter parts of the story to put in those early scenes. There also was the addition of the toucan. I put that in as an excuse for Ken to have someone (something) to talk to while Moe made his sojourns to the other side of the island. Hopefully, that bird added a light moment or two to the movie. The most significant changes I made in the screenplay was the invention of Moe removing the shrapnel from Ken’s back, thus making both men feel that maybe Moe was responsible for Ken’s paraplegia. This gave Moe a motivation to feel real guilt about Ken’s plight, and Ken’s feelings for Moe were torn between gratitude and hate—Moe saved his life but left him a cripple? Better off dead? A dilemma to be sure. Thus the feeble attempt at suicide by Ken. As I recall, Philip liked this addition and gave his wholehearted approval. Also, I think that in the screenplay we changed Ken’s slur against Moe from “Heathen” to “Jew.” If my recollection is correct, and Ken indeed attacked Moe in that way, Philip had to have approved. I would have never made that big a change without Philip’s blessing. Because Moe’s internal thoughts and feelings made up a huge majority of the story, I had to figure out how to turn those thoughts into audible dialogue (I didn’t want to do a voice-over). If I had it to do over—keep in mind, it’s not the kind of material that one would think of for the screen, but given my need for economy and location—and if I had about twice the money, there would be a few things I would do differently besides getting real rifles for the Japanese. For instance, I’d put in a couple of flashbacks of Moe with his family and probably the same thing for Ken and his “dreams.” But all in all, the screenplay was, as I have believed for more...
DPR: You pointed out that Moe’s inner thoughts, expressed directly or indirectly, make up most of Roth’s original story. In your film, did you feel the need to retain Moe as the primary focalizer—that is, the main narrative perspective—throughout, or did you want to “fill out” the perspective of Ken, the gentile in the story?

JR: In the best of all worlds, I would have liked to see both of their stories carry almost equal weight—almost, because Moe has got to be the “hero” of the piece. As Roth wrote it, it’s Moe’s story, but I tried to give Ken a lot more depth than was in the short story, but whether or not I succeeded is up to history to decide. There was a similar movie several years ago, *Hell in the Pacific* (1968), starring Lee Marvin and a Japanese actor, Toshiro Mifune. The plot was similar—the Marvin character was an American soldier, and Mifune played a Japanese soldier. Basically, it was two guys from different cultures and different issues trying to live harmoniously on a deserted island, realizing that each depended on the other for survival. Basically, that’s what I was trying to do.

DPR: You had mentioned earlier that you wanted to avoid voice-overs as a means of emphasizing Moe’s centrality in the narrative. Why not do the voice-overs? What might you have lost in adding them?

JR: Probably nothing, but it was simply a personal choice at that early time in my career to try and convert Moe’s thoughts into dialogue wherever possible. Voice-overs seemed like a cop-out back then, although in retrospect, if I had chosen that format and used it in the entire movie, it might have worked quite well. I don’t think I would have lost anything—perhaps I might have even gained some further insights—but there’s no sense crying over spilt milk. I think that writing and filming scenes from the men’s backstories would probably pretty much cover the major content of their thoughts that weren’t brought out in dialogue, but it’s too late now.

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DPR: As originally written, Roth uses one of these inner monologues to reference the title of the short story. Not long after Ken attempts suicide, with both men going stir crazy waiting for help to arrive, Moe thinks to himself that “the craziness wasn’t waiting—it was expecting. Better to act like a man who builds a house but knows that each night his day’s work will be destroyed by vandals. He doesn’t even pray that the vandals will stay away. He expects them but pours cement anyway.” When you adapted “Expect the Vandals,” how did you feel about having to cut the direct reference to Roth’s title?

JR: As a twenty-three-year-old kid, I felt that title was way too esoteric for the audience I figured we would attract. Roger and I decided in the beginning that we wouldn’t use that title, because it would mean nothing out of Roth’s context in the story. If I had chosen to use a voice-over throughout, quite possibly I would have included that passage, but I would have thought long and hard. I felt then and still feel it’s a bit pretentious—a brilliant young author stretching for something very literary as a metaphor. But how many people know that Van-
dals were an ancient destructive civilization? (Even though Roth's “vandals” were the lowercase, run-of-the-mill mischief-makers.) Why would a man build a house knowing that each night his house would be destroyed? To keep busy, of course—but it seems very arbitrary for Moe, no matter how deep his pessimism, to decide that no rescue will ever come. Talk about seeing the glass half-empty! I didn't want both men to feel the situation was totally hopeless—it just didn't seem like good drama. I didn't have to cut it; I could have turned it into a speech for Moe to make to Ken, or even to the toucan. But for all the reasons above, I decided against it.

DPR: The references to vandals in Roth's original story come up again toward the end, when the two men are dumbfounded by the goats on the island. And then, of course, there is the lead up to Operation Crossroads at the very end of the story, where the atomic bomb becomes a sort of “vandal.” Is this one reason why you cut the final scene of the story, where Ken and Moe are on the observer ship waiting for the bomb to drop?

JR: As to the second reference to “the vandals,” once again, Roth's deeper meanings had escaped me, but more important, because I hadn't fully understood the symbolism of his first reference, I couldn't logically include the second. As for the finish, with the two men aboard the ship, leaving this out was mostly a case of having only enough money and time to shoot what we shot. We rationalized the exclusion of the scene on the ship by proclaiming the scene anticlimactic and chose to end the picture with the two men being saved and with a reference to an “atomic bomb,” which, of course, meant nothing to Moe and Ken. I'm perfectly satisfied with the way that the picture ended, as I'm sure the audience would view this as a “happy ending” and could then presume any scenario they chose about what happened to Ken and Moe in the future.

DPR: The subtext of Roth’s short story concerns atomic warfare. How did you feel, at the time you made Battle of Blood Island, referencing the atomic bomb and the kind of destruction that the title suggests? What were the politics, if any, underlying your film?

JR: Quite frankly, because I was relatively young when I made the film, the politics of the atomic bomb were far from uppermost in my mind. Remember, in context of the film, at that time, nobody really knew what the consequences would be. Of course, I was aware of the drastic destruction and unimaginable death that the bomb had created and had had some discussions about whether or not the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were necessary to end the war. The arguments for the dropping of the bomb at that time were very strongly in favor. Although the war had been over for several years, people (with the exception of the bomb's basic creator, Albert Einstein) had not yet realized the vast horrors that atomic and hydrogen weapons could wreak on the planet. That didn't come until the cold war became full-blown in the sixties. The alternative to those bombings was an invasion of the Japanese mainland, which, in the minds of President Truman and most military advisers, would cost tens of thousands of American lives; thus, the use of the bomb was inevitable. There were
those, of course, who felt that a demonstration of the bomb prior to its actual use would have been much more humanitarian and had the same effect: the Japanese surrender. But other heads prevailed. History, of course, has shown that part of the use of the bomb was to foil Russia who was about to jump into the Pacific war and muck up the Potsdam agreements as to the division of the spoils, and there was controversy over the perception that we used this terrible weapon against the Japanese instead of the Germans because the Japanese “were not white people.” However, I admit that in my youthful—indeed, selfish—enthusiasm to make a decent movie and advance my personal career, I didn’t really take a political position regarding the bomb in the film. As far as I was concerned at the time, the testing of the bomb on Bikini Atoll was simply a way for Moe and Ken to be discovered and rescued. Remember, those small-budget exploitation pictures rarely, if ever, delved into politics. Of course, someone watching the film today and trying to discern a political message regarding the bomb and its connection to the title might find all sorts of things that I didn’t realize were in the fabric of the story. In that regard, I often wonder about the search for deeper meaning in stories, films, and poems—“The ground was covered with glistening white snow....” Some readers might feel that the poet or author was using a veiled reference to virginity or purity or some such—others, like me at the time, would have taken the phrase at face value and presumed the author was attempting to create a winter atmosphere. And so it was with atomic bombs and my movie.

DPR: So where does your work take you today? I know that you’ve written a number of books on indoor gardening, but do you still have any interest in working for either the large or small screens?

JR: If anyone were to call and offer me a job in show biz, I’d be there in a New York minute (whatever that is). However, as most people know, a TV- or screenwriter is considered over-the-hill by the time he or she is forty years old. Besides, I have been appearing as Mr. Mother Earth with enormous success since 1971 and am proud to say that I have been properly credited as the person who promulgated the indoor gardening business as we know it today. I was the gardening editor at Redbook Magazine and the Los Angeles Times up until about seven years ago, but when those gigs ended, I decided to put my Mr. Mother Earth shirts into mothballs. He had served his purpose and then some. So the bottom line is I’m “retired,” although my wife thinks of it as “unemployed.” I did sell a book last year, an anecdotal autobiography called Radio, TV, Mother Earth & Me: Memories of a Hollywood Life, and I still write almost every day, however, mainly because I love the process. I have no illusions about selling anything, but I just finished a spec screenplay and am working on the fourth rewrite of a novel with the hope that I can ascend to the level of Philip Roth. (Hah!)

DPR: You mentioned yourself as a young filmmaker hoping to make his mark with Battle of Blood Island. How did your work on this adaptation serve you in your subsequent endeavors?
JR: Well, I certainly had a satisfactory career—sixteen produced movies (I wrote and directed four, and wrote the others), more than two hundred sitcom episodes, thirteen published nonfiction books, and lots of newspaper and magazine articles. How much did writing and directing *Blood Island* have to do with these endeavors? Quite a bit. In fact, that movie was a huge turning point in my fledgling career. Although the movie was not a “hit” in the traditional sense, it was an enormous learning experience and ranks as one of my favorite pieces of work, despite the many difficulties encountered in the making and the hindsight of what might have been had I a bit more experience. Making the movie also cemented my relationship with the legendary filmmaker Roger Corman, with whom I worked on several other projects over a period of nearly fifty years.

A big bonus of having made the film was that it attracted the attention of several agents, most of whom offered to take me on as a client. I eventually signed with the William Morris Agency, one of the world’s largest talent agents. I was associated with them for almost twenty years, and they helped guide my writing career into the situation comedy market where I had wanted to work. I think that everything a writer writes—films, novels, plays, TV shows—is a learning experience, but *Battle of Blood Island* stands out as one of the most important ventures of my life. Perhaps even more important, I met the mother of my children while shooting the film in Puerto Rico—she was there on vacation—and I now have two fabulous daughters and two beautiful granddaughters as a result.

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