

## OFF SCREEN

# Nothing But a Good Tale

By Jennine Lanouette

**When, in the fall** of 1962, Michael Roemer set out with Robert Young in an old station wagon for an eight-week trip through the South, he'd met only a few black people in his life and had no specific passion for the civil rights movement. He and Young were still reeling from the devastating blow they were dealt by NBC when their documentary *Cortile Cascino*, about an Italian family's struggle to survive in a Sicilian slum, was abruptly withdrawn from broadcast. It was Young who, while previously working on a documentary about the student sit-ins, had been impressed by the struggles of black Americans and had proposed the trip as a way to gather material for their first dramatic feature.

A letter of endorsement from Roy Wilkins of the NAACP gave them entrée into small-town chapters, enabling them to stay with local families. This led to harassment from local authorities that was unsettling but not unexpected. What Roemer did not anticipate, though, was how much the segregation and marginalization of Southern blacks would reverberate with his own background as a Jew growing up in Berlin in the 1920s. "It was like coming home," says Roemer.

Roemer (who also directed *The Plot Against Harry*, released in

1991, more than 20 years after it was made) arrived in this country as a teenager in 1945, having spent most of the war years in England. Though he remembers well the physical exclusions of Jews in Germany—not being allowed to go to the movies or having to sit on a separate yellow bench—the greatest impact he felt was on his family. "The man who has no way of supporting his family," he says, "turns the violence against those who are closest to him and against himself. My father was such a man. So you get the father who doesn't stay, and a family raised by women. These things have nothing to do with race. It happens everywhere."

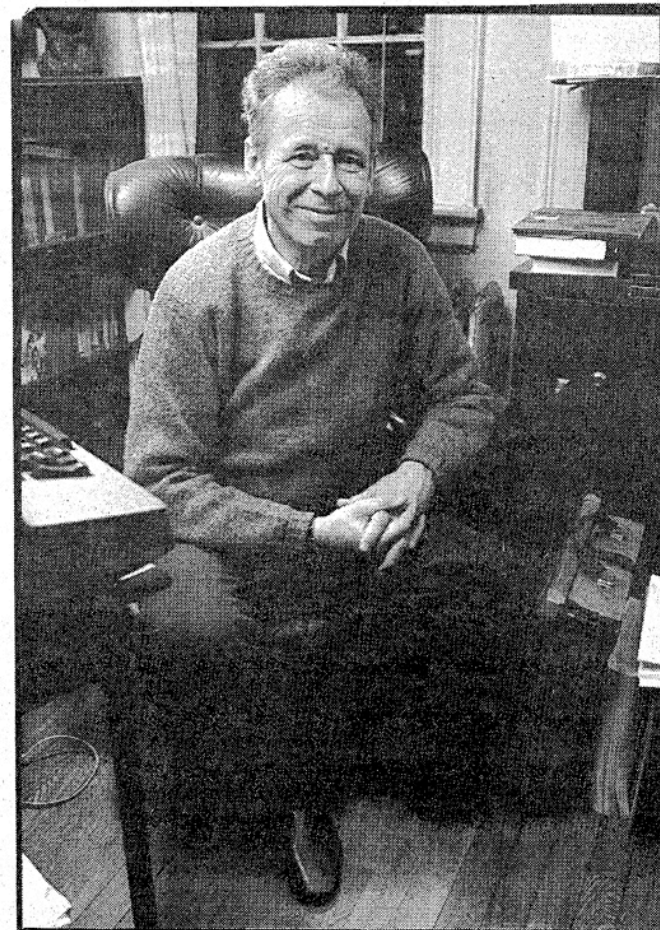
While the idea for a film about a man trying to define his manhood within an oppressive society had been percolating in Roemer's mind for some time, it had been back-burnered. "But," says Roemer, "de Tocqueville once said, 'The problem with travel is that you always take yourself with you.' On one level you're doing a good deal of work like a journalist, and on another there is this thing that's inside you. Then, if you are fortunate, there is an encounter between what you find outside and what you have inside."

And so came the film *Nothing But a Man* (now showing at the Film Forum), about a young black man who refuses to give up his

dignity to satisfy the expectations of white society, directed by Roemer, photographed by Young, and cowritten by Roemer and Young. With Ivan Dixon (of *Hogan's Heroes* fame) and jazz singer Abbey Lincoln in the starring roles, and supporting performances by Gloria Foster and Yaphet Kotto, the film also features a soundtrack full of early Motown—Martha and the Vandellas, Little Stevie Wonder, the Marvellettes, and others—from a time when the label was still barely known.

Although *Nothing But a Man* played to great critical acclaim at the Venice and New York film festivals and was a hit on the art house circuit in 1965, the film was largely limited to a white audience due to the culturally isolated nature of art films, and the unwillingness of commercial exhibitors to show them. At that time, the concept of marketing to a black audience was still years away from realization. Yet, when the film was released on 16mm there proved to be a huge appetite for it. A \$22,000 purchase of the 16mm rights by one of the leading nontheatrical distributors of the time yielded a gross, over seven years, of close to \$700,000, which came through rentals to churches, schools, and community groups.

While Roemer is particularly gratified by the positive response



Sustaining a life: director Michael Roemer

*Nothing But a Man* has received from African Americans, he insists that he didn't make the film to advance the cause of civil rights. "I believe that stories are very important," he says. "That they sustain life. And in that sense

they're political, but only in that sense. I do want to be on the side of the angels. I know that. I don't want to destroy anything. But I didn't make this film for any other reason than that I think it's a great story." ■