

FROM THE

DESK OF

Behind every great woman and every great man there is an office.

ROGER EBERT

Film critic at large

An endless flow of cinematic flotsam and jetsam keeps infiltrating the tiny office of the Chicago Sun-Times's Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic, Roger Ebert, and to the despair of the cleaning ladies, none of it appears to be in any hurry to leave. As a result, the janitorial staff now gives his desk wide berth. Like the Water Tower on North Michigan, Ebert's cinematic lair seems to have become a Windy City landmark.

His cherubic countenance is well known to the millions of viewers of Siskel & Ebert at the Movies, the weekly TV film-review show on which he appears with—and more often against—his co-host and rival, Chicago Tribune film critic Gene Siskel. Their show has probably done more to institutionalize the “thumbs up” (or, conversely, “thumbs down”) signal than the Indy 500 drivers. Syndicated nationally, the 30-minute program is the commercial reincarnation of PBS's Sneak Previews, which the two started in 1978.

Celluloid obviously embodies life to Ebert, who joined the paper at age 24, after graduating with a journalism degree from the University of Illinois. “The first movies that really got to me,” he recalls, “were animated films like Walt Disney's Dumbo. I thought they were real, much more real than photographed movies. And the first movie that made me think I'd make a profession out of moviegoing was La Dolce Vita. It broke a lot of rules.”

As a critic, so does Ebert, who—pointedly ignoring the late Kenneth Tynan's line, “A critic is like the palace eunuch who sees the trick done every night and rages he can't”—wrote the original screenplay for Russ Meyer's campy Beyond the Valley of the Dolls back in 1969.

Those who sometimes find Ebert's preferences too cerebral would be pleasantly surprised to see the critic's likes and dislikes, flamboyantly displayed in his cluttered cubicle.

An alluring cut-out pinup of Marilyn Monroe in the famous skirt-blowing scene from The Seven Year Itch is propped up in front of Clark Gable and a smoldering Vivien Leigh (Gone With the Wind). Original posters from Casablanca, The Wild One, and Headline Hunters are close by.

On Ebert's desk, a gum ball machine filled with marbles, a Rolodex, and a telephone share equal billing with plastic reproductions of Mickey and Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck. In a jumble of consistent chaos, nearby is a can of Bear B-gone, an “extra strength formula for life's unbearable situations—skunks, raccoons, in-laws, lawyers, bosses”; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Orion paperweights; an “Underworld” miniature typewriter; a three-year-old press pass; and a simulated Venus flytrap from Little Shop of Horrors.

On a credenza to the left are copies of Ebert's books, as well as those of his favorite film critics—Pauline Kael, of The New Yorker, and Dwight MacDonald, formerly with Esquire—and additional mountains of movie compendia. Behind his desk is the ATEX editorial computer used by writers at the Sun-Times.

Sitting serenely in the center of it all is

From a New Book by Alumni HAL DRUCKER and SID LERNER

With F.P. Model. Photographs by Sing-Si Schwartz.

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P E O P L E I N T H E I R W O R K P L A C E

P E O P L E I N T H E I R W O R K P L A C E



Gail Sheehy

the mainstay of Ebert's professional existence, a portable Tandy Radio Shack Model 100, through which his stories can be sent out via MCI Mail. Ebert takes it everywhere he goes, to facilitate meeting deadlines.

"It's my computer mailbox," he explains. "You can make a local telephone call in Toronto or Cannes and dump it in, and it comes out the other end."

G A I L
S H E E H Y

Journalist, author, and lecturer

Normally, I would feel like a shut-in when I'm writing, because I love the outdoors," says Gail Sheehy, standing in her nestlike 12-by-12-foot office, nine floors above Fifth Avenue on the glass-enclosed terrace of her "working" apartment. "Here I feel like I'm outside even when I'm inside."

Outside is an incomparable view of Central Park and Manhattan's Upper West Side. On the terrace are potted rosebushes, laurels, pines, and a birch tree, which spring to life during warm weather. (There is also a circular trampoline, on which the trim, five-foot-three-inch author goes into her Flying Wallenda routine mornings at 5, when she's working on overdrive and needs to discharge the extra energy.) "To be able to watch when thunderstorms start and the wind begins swirling is a wonderful thing," she explains. "I couldn't live in Manhattan and be a writer any other way."

Sheehy's airy office contains reminders of her accomplishments: two of her four Front Page awards from the News-women's Club of New York, whose symbol is Pegasus; cassettes of her numerous interviews—"I just came back from London, where I did 40 in two weeks"—and a 1979 Harvard Graduate School of Business award recognizing her as an "Outstanding Human Behaviorist, Author, Journalist." There is also a telephone, a Sharp fax machine, and a white Formica kneehole desk, which holds research materials and books.

At her busiest, Sheehy clocks in 12-

hour days on an IBM PC word processor at her four-by-five-foot easel desk. In winter, when even a baseboard space heater and standing portable radiator don't keep her warm out on the terrace, she wears mukluks—"I got them on a writing assignment that sent me to western Alaska"—and gloves (which don't inhibit her ability to type) to keep going. Spring and summer are a different story. "Central Park is my front yard," she says, "and when the weather is warm, I spend two hours a day having lunch on a park bench, reading, and watching the pigeon feeders."

On the window ledge over her easel is a framed invitation showing Sheehy standing next to a life-size, die-cut picture of President Reagan, with a bird perched on his head. The caption reads: "Tina Brown invites you to the celebration of the publication of Gail Sheehy's newest book. . . ." Next to this is an in-box of research files for an article she is writing on Margaret Thatcher, a small quartz clock, 10 or so reference books, and a framed photograph of "all my favorite people"—Sheehy with her sister; husband Clay Felker, editor of *Manhattan, inc.*; and daughters Maura and Mohm.

There is also a large, opened *Webster's Third International Dictionary* ("I always like to use a new word in every article"), an elegant photograph of Sheehy and Felker taken in one of England's Great Houses during their recent trip, and floral-print tin boxes containing desk accessories and supplies. On her desk is a large bronze statue of a mythical nude female warrior astride a flying horse (recalling the News-women's Club symbol), a 1987 Christmas present from her husband, who gave it to her as "a spur."

"The Shoeleather Sheehy Award," a gag gift given to her by *Vanity Fair* political editor Elise O'Shaughnessy, consists of a pair of women's shoes entirely covered with magazine articles Sheehy wrote for the publication about the 1989 presidential candidates. "I went to every one of their hometowns"—she laughs—"and *did* real shoe-leather reporting."

The author of eight books—including *Character: America's Search for Leadership* and *Passages*, which was on the *New York*

Times best-seller list for three years—Sheehy is the contributing political editor for *Vanity Fair*, often writes for the *New York Times Magazine* and *Parade*, among others, and appears regularly on such programs as *Nightline*, the *MacNeil Lehrer News-Hour*; and *Good Morning America*.

Even so, she has a hidden goal not everybody knows.

"I love the theater," she admits, "and my secret dream is to write a play."

J U L I A
C H I L D

The French chef

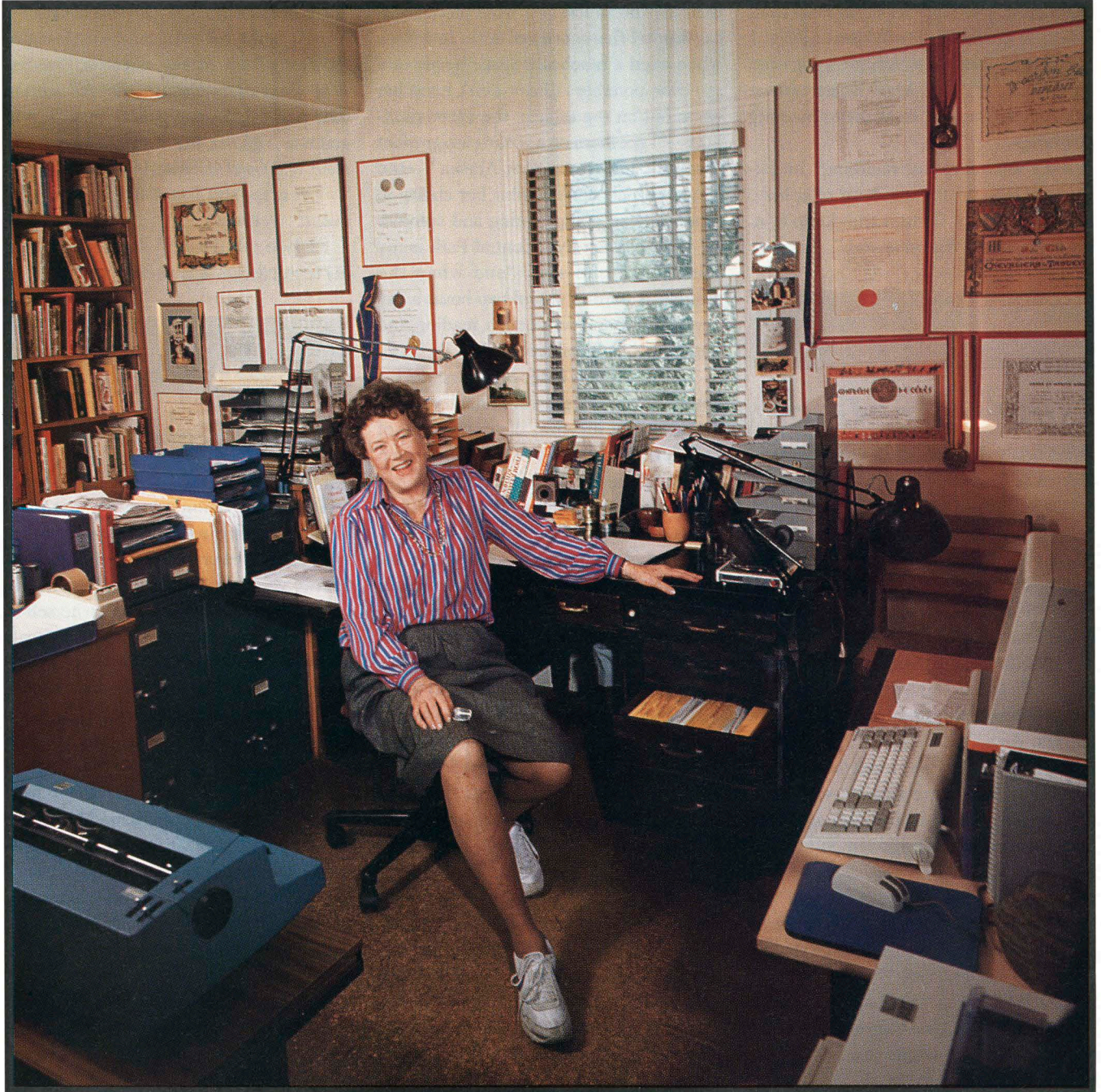
As the eponymous cooking instructor of PBS television's long-running *The French Chef*, she endeared herself to her millions of viewers as a harried host, ferociously wielding her giant balloon whisk, who kept offering sage advice to herself in Childian malapropisms. As the bifocals slipped, ingredients ker-plopped to the floor. Yet she remained unflappable. "If this happens, just scoop it back. Remember, you are alone in the kitchen, and nobody can see you!"

Was it all an act? Could *that* tall but frazzled TV gourmet be the same blue-eyed, brown-haired Julia Child who now sits—cool, unflustered, and *totally* in control of her environment—in an office directly above the kitchen Craig Claiborne once described as "the best-equipped in all of Boston"?

Yes, indeed. She regales the visitor with a rendering of how her written testimony brought down the House of Representatives last year. Along with other members of the Authors Guild, she lobbied Congress to throw out a provision in the 1986 Tax Reform Act that would have denied writers the right to deduct expenses in the year they were incurred. Child wasted no time on emotional appeals; hers cut right to the bone of the matter when she asked, in effect: How does the IRS want writers like me to allocate the oregano? By the pinch? The argument reportedly got a round of applause; the committee got the point; and Child got back her concurrent write-offs.

et al.: From the Desk of...

P E O P L E I N T H E I R W O R K P L A C E
P E O P L E I N T H E I R W O R K P L A C E



Julia Child

Kitchen and office occupy most of the first and second floors of the three-story clapboard house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that Mr. and Mrs. Paul Cushing Child bought in 1961 upon his retirement.

Julia and Paul had met in 1943 in wartime Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), while both were in the OSS. She wanted to be a spy but settled for file clerk; he was an artist-turned-mapmaker, who liked good food. They went from India to Chungking and Kunming, China; got married after the war; moved in 1948 to Paris, where he worked for USIA and she took cooking lessons from a disciple of Auguste Escoffier. She formed a lasting friendship with Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle, and the three women organized their own cooking school, L'Ecole des Trois Gourmandes (five dollars a lesson). Wherever the government sent the Childs—Marseilles, Bonn, Oslo—branches of L'Ecole were set up. A huge book began taking shape,

which Alfred A. Knopf, an astute gourmet, snapped up. Published in 1961, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* did not become a best-seller until Julia Child went on the air two years later, following a guest spot on a book-and-author show. WGBH-TV's Russell Morash, who would become her longtime producer-director, remembers asking himself, "Who is this madwoman, and why is she cooking an omelet on a book review show?" He soon found out, as viewers all over America reorganized their social lives around Monday nights at nine. The series changed forever the way America eats.

The French Chef and its sequels have now run for an astounding 25 years. Though Julia Child hasn't been "live" for the past few years, producer Morash is now looking for funding to bring her back for a new PBS series. Meanwhile, she's not been idle. In between visits to the Childs' other homes, in Santa Barbara and the south of France, she pops up now and then on ABC's *Good*

Morning America, and after four years of writing a column for *Parade*, she's just come out with a big illustrated how-to book based on those columns, *The Way to Cook*, which is supplemented by six hour-long teaching cassettes.

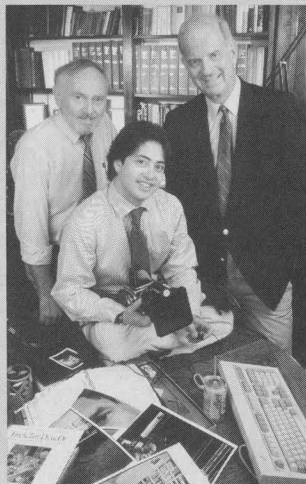
The Child house is a model of organization. The office, like the kitchen below, is laid out ergonomically so that everything, including the computer and electric typewriter, is within easy reach—or roll of the swivel chair. With the window wall garnished by framed honors, diplomas, certificates, and personal photographs, the other three walls are lined with cookbooks—two thousand at last count. Squeezed in between desk and sundry tables are 18 steel file drawers and 10 cardboard storage files crammed with more recipes, categorized and subcategorized. "Cooking," Julia Child says, "is such a jolly profession. I've been cooking for more than 40 years, and there's still so much to learn." **S**

"Your desk is your altar ego!"

So say Hal Drucker and Sid Lerner, primary authors of this article and the recently published book from which it is drawn.

Two years ago over lunch, Drucker and Lerner, longtime informal collaborators both based in New York City, reasoned that most American achievers spend more of their waking hours behind their desks than perhaps anywhere else. The objects on a person's desk, they decided, and the way they are placed help describe that person's character. With that in mind, Drucker and Lerner enlisted photographer Sing-Si Schwartz, found a publisher, and began assembling "desk-descriptions" of successful writers, performers, politicians, and the like. The end product, 42 workplace portraits, was published in October by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich as *From the Desk Of*.

Drucker and Lerner met in



Drucker and Lerner (left and right) with photographer Schwartz

the so-called "Hellbox" at Syracuse University—a prefab building alongside Yates Castle where editors of the *Daily Orange*, *Onondagan*, and *Syracusan* worked. Drucker was sports editor of both the student newspaper and yearbook; Lerner

the editor and later business manager of the *Syracusan*, a now-defunct humor magazine. Both graduated in 1953, Drucker in English and Lerner in English and advertising.

Since then, Drucker has worked as a copywriter and account executive for major ad agencies such as Grey, BBDO, and Ogilvy & Mather, and as director of advertising for Hertz International. In 1980 he formed his own agency, Challice Inc., specializing in direct response campaigns. Lerner also worked in advertising until 1970, when he created Sid Lerner Associates, a creative services and ventures company. His other books include *Monday Morning Quarterback*, *New Words Dictionary* (highlighted in this magazine last December), and *Facts on File*.

Contributing to the writing of *From the Desk Of* was another alumnus, F. Peter Model, who

earned a degree in political science and journalism in 1952. Model has written for a number of magazines, including *GQ* and *Harvard Business Review*, and writes a regular column for *Wilson Library Bulletin*. He runs an editorial consulting firm in his name, and wrote *JFK: The Case for Conspiracy*, a book published in 1975. He also ghostwrote *The Company Image: Building Your Identity and Influence in the Marketplace*.

What the three alumni have compiled is a set of intimate supplements to the usual public portraits of these celebrities. If you don't think intimate is the right word, consider this: some potential subjects, including Norman Mailer, turned down their opportunity to appear in *From the Desk Of*, regarding their desks too personal to photograph or describe.