

*The below piece – written by Ira Levin on the eve of the release of the film adaptation of his first novel “A Kiss Before Dying” – ran in the June 24, 1956 Sunday edition of the New York Times.*



## AN ENTIRE ADAPTATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

By IRA LEVIN

SEVERAL years ago I wrote a suspense novel called “A Kiss Before Dying,” which enjoyed a satisfying degree of success and was purchased for filming by Twentieth Century-Fox. A movie sale is supposed to inflame the heart of a novelist with a fierce, unwavering joy. My own joy flickered somewhat weakly, since I learned of the movie sale in a telephone booth at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where I was a three-day-old draftee feeling foolish in a uniform. While I sat listening to my agent’s happy prattle, a sergeant tapped me on the shoulder and suggested I fall in. I did, and it took me two years to climb out.

During those two years I felt as though I had sold a particularly plump daughter into the household of a sadist. What were they doing to my book out there? Strange reports sifted back to my post at the Signal Corps Pictorial Center: Twentieth Century-Fox had resold “A Kiss Before Dying” to an independent outfit called Crown Productions. Who were Crown Productions? Were they ready for independence or were they upstart rebels? Robert Wagner had been signed for the leading role. (Nice, clean-cut Robert Wagner playing my villainous protagonist?) These extra-military frettings detracted lamentably from the brilliance of the training film scenarios which were my assigned duty.

One day I received a wire:

Would I come out to Hollywood and write the screenplay of “A Kiss Before Dying”? Not for fourteen months, I wouldn’t. I was a contract writer on another screenplay, “The Quartermaster Semi-Mobile Field Bath.” (Twenty naked men, count them, twenty!) I passed the time by assiduously perusing Hedda Hopper—her column, that is—and learned that Virginia

Leith was to play opposite Robert Wagner. Lovely Virginia Leith! I took a cold Field Bath and turned my attention to “The Quatermaster Semi-Mobile Field Laundry.” (If you liked “The Field Bath” you’ll love “The Field Laundry”!)

Finally the day approached when I—like Crown Productions—would achieve independence. I sat in the barracks with some of my 200 roommates. “When I get out,” said one—the comic relief from Brooklyn—“I’m going to manage my father’s butcher store.” “When I get out,” said another, “I’m going back to college on the GI Bill.” “When I get out,” I remarked casually, “I’m going to Hollywood. I’m going to loll beside a swimming pool with gin and tonic and lovely Virginia Leith.” That ended that conversation, all right.

On D-Day minus ten, when I was whistling intricate versions of “California, Here I Come,” I was called to the telephone and a clipped British voice said, “Mr. Levin? This is Maurice Evans.”

I have a friend who does impersonations, so in a clipped British voice I told him to drop dead, old chap.

Maurice Evans pondered that for a moment, then asked me whether—personal feelings aside—I would care to write a stage version of Mac Hyman’s novel. “No Time for Sergeants.”

“Yes,” I said, because the stage has always been *the* goal. So here is what happened. Lawrence Roman, in Hollywood, wrote the screen version of my novel, while I, in New York, wrote the stage version of Mac Hyman’s novel, while Mac Hyman, in Georgia, counted money.

Well, “Sergeants” is safely billeted at the Alvin Theatre, and “A Kiss Before Dying,” I am told, will open here soon, with no help from me.

But me, I’m still in New York, working on another play that isn’t an adaptation of anything—and no closer to that swimming pool and lovely Virginia Leith than when I was just a plain dog-soldier guarding the ramparts of democracy.

No, Virginia, there is no Santa Claus.

