

BAFTA A Life in Pictures: Joss Whedon

14 June 2013 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

Francine Stock: Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this Life in Pictures with Joss Whedon. As writer and director Joss Whedon is arguably the most popular and influential filmmaker of his generation. He's given us completely entertaining and original and compelling characters. He's given us witty and at the same time heartfelt scripts, and he's also given us probably more apocalypses than a vampire has incisors. So before I invite him onto the stage let's just remind ourselves of the breadth of Joss Whedon's achievement.

Montage of clips

FS: Ladies and gentlemen, Joss Whedon.

RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE

FS: So Joss Whedon, welcome to BAFTA, welcome to your Life In Pictures. And let's start where we really ought to, at the beginning: 1964, New York. Born into a family of screenwriters. So you've got a screenwriting grandfather, screenwriting father, a couple of siblings who write for the screen as well. Was there ever any chance that you would do anything else?

Joss Whedon: Yes, yes. Anything as long as it wasn't real job. I wanted to draw comic books, I wanted to act, I wanted to sing and dance. I wanted to do absolutely anything to do with the arts – I was interested in. Learning an instrument sounded hard, so that was off. But the whole thing just fascinated me, for a long time I thought it was definitely going to be film, but then I got sidetracked by something else, but I always did come back to it.

FS: I imagine in this household, since you had these generations of people who had written for comedy and screen comedy, that it was all repartee and wordplay and that kind of thing.

JW: Well you'd think that, and it's true. My mother, who was not a comedy writer, was extremely intelligent and witty – I think that's what attracted her and my father in the first place, though they split up early on. But there were always comedy writers around, they travel in packs, and you're in a room full of unbelievably erudite, intelligent, funny people who are all one-upping each other and all you're thinking about is 'I want in, '. I can remember the first times I made those guys laugh, on purpose. It's an incredibly empowering feeling.

FS: And then in amongst all of that you then spend a bit of time at an English public school.

JW: Yes, two and a half years as a Wykehamist.

FS: So this is kind of at the elite of the elite end.

JW: Yes, I had no business being there. I majored in dropping acid and sneaking off to Grateful Dead shows. I received very high marks.

FS: Did you enjoy it?

JW: Yes, it was the best school, I was not a great student. I think that I had many conditions for which they did not, at the time, have acronyms but now they do. And it was a real struggle for me to see things through, except in English class. English class was always the thing that I treasured, and my teachers at Winchester were phenomenal. Studying Shakespeare for the A level, some of the best times.

And although I was very dark and miserable, this hideous little homunculus, who managed to annoy everyone, I mean everyone – because I made a list – even when I was miserable I was like 'this is the most exciting, most wonderful being miserable anybody could hope for, '. The place was so gorgeous, the teachers were so good, it was an incredible experience and I was very grateful for my misery.

FS: And that Shakespeare thing that you mention, Shakespeare is going to run all the way through this story isn't it, and obviously we're going to end up with *Much Ado* at the end. But presumably even before you went to Winchester, before you came here, there was a love of Shakespeare.

JW: Yes, my parents, that community they were in was very theatre oriented. There was a lot of readings, which were what started the ones I did later on with my actor and writer friends. I started reading Shakespeare before I really could, I would just sort of plough my way through it because it seemed like the thing to do, and every now and then.... one of the things that I love and that I believe in the most is exposing children to something that they're not getting or are not ready for.

Not in a horrible way, like 'hey kids, you want to watch *Funny Games*? It's called *Funny Games*! So it's probably fun, I think it's about golf!'. But in the sense of [letting] them experience something that they maybe get a third of, and the rest is weird poetry. And when they come back to it they're already internalised a little of it. It's important. If you just experience exactly what you're meant to at

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that age I feel like you're not going to want more.

FS: So you went back to university in the States, but then how quickly did you decide that screenwriting and television writing, which was what you got into was where...

JW: Well, I went to Wesleyan University. They had a very nice theatre programme, and the best film programme in the world. Since film was a relatively new subject to be taught, I will say that without hesitation. In terms of production – useless. As the few people who got to see my senior thesis film can attest. But in terms of theory, extraordinary – really brilliant teachers who helped me understand everything that I do about film.

I got to show them *Much Ado*, my professor Jeanine Basinger who's my mentor and dear friend, still, I call with questions about my life and my act structures. But I took *Serenity* back there, and I had at least four professors in the audience who absolutely could see themselves in the film. So it was an extraordinary time, but I didn't think I wanted to make TV, because American TV I sort of frowned on.

I didn't think it was all that good, and I didn't realise that I was going to be a writer. And I'm a writer in the sense that that's what I wish would be on my tombstone. It would be 'writer' above all things. Hopefully that doesn't show up too much in my directing, but it is the greatest love for me. And I discovered it after I was at university, because I never studied writing.

I sort of assumed I would write the things I made. I was going to go off... I was very vague. It's amazing how vague I was. 'I'm going to Hollywood....to California, I might go north, make some independent film with the five cents that I have,'. I have no idea what I thought I was actually going to do, besides sponge off my father for a year – which is what I did.

And then I thought 'if I write some TV it's good training, I can make some money, I can make my feet wet. And then I discovered *Roseanne* and shows... it all started at half hour because that's what my father and my grandfather had written. And later on I discovered my bent was more towards drama, but the moment I started writing, like 'I have to finish this, it's about getting a job,' I was in Heaven. I was like 'oh, this is it. Now we're here,'.

FS: We're going to move on, inevitably, quite speedily, but you have *Buffy The Vampire*

Slayer, and she becomes a feature film first, doesn't she? Which people sometimes have forgotten about.

JW: And other people have tried to. But you had to bring it up!

FS: She was yours, and she sort of got away from you a bit at that stage.

JW: Yes, she started seeing other people, and I feel they were a bad influence. Yeah, it was before I even had a job. That was really the first notion I had, that I thought 'ooh, I understand this film,'. I was working in a video store, because I was going to be a director and actors are waiters and directors work in video stores. And they must not cross the street.

One of the things I would see... I love horror movies, I love B movies, I love low budget, I love the guys you can see in there plugging, making [them] out of just an absurd love of storytelling. And sometimes they're terrible at it, but it doesn't matter, you're just rooting for them. And I also would see, there was a slew of titles like *Revenge of the Bimbos* or *Attack of the Bimbos*, something where you think 'oh, they put a twist on it,'. And of course you see the film and you say 'no, they haven't,'. Just *Bimbos*, okay.

So in a brilliant and self-serving move I thought if I make something in a genre that's all terrible, that's even remotely good, then I'm going to be the king of a tiny piece of media. People will love me for not sucking. So *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* partially came out of my [idea] that if somebody saw that on a shelf they might go 'oh, I'll give it a try,' and see what was supposed to be a horror film that was actually funny and empowering and well structured. They're dreams, we all have them.

FS: So there she was, but directed by somebody else, and taken off in a direction that you probably would not exactly have chosen.

JW: No...

FS: But then if we fast forward, you then are one of the writers on *Toy Story*, recognised by the Academy and all that. What did you learn on *Toy Story*, do you think?

JW: *Toy Story* was a singular experience, just because you're writing it as they're drawing it and drawing it is writing it. So it's this weird collaboration. It was enormous fun. I already knew that this was going to be a great film. Somebody else had taken a crack at it, they

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sent me the script and they said 'we think this is going to go, we're not sure...' and it was just terrible. Really bad.

I was like, my wife was 'for the love of God don't do this,' and I went 'this is the one,'. It's like if you have a script where everything sort of works, you're never going to fix it. If you have a perfect idea – which is what John Lasseter had – and nothing in it works, that's a good job. And so it was very exciting for me, and it was very exciting for me to work with all those guys.

The guys I was working with day to day, are the Pixar directors. It's Pete Docter and Andrew Stanton, the late Joe Ranft, the guys who really sort of came up and ran the thing. And they were just the sweetest guys. I was sort of teaching them about comic structures, and they were teaching me about visual style, and we'd all sit together and they'd all draw until one of them got a Sharpie headache and had to go outside.

It was a very real thing, Sharpie headache. There is no cure, please give. And then sometimes I'd be like 'aaahhh,' and run into my office. And also it was the first time, really that I'd written with parameters that were very specific. The first one being Tom Hanks. They said 'we've got Tom Hanks to do Woody. And there was the first scene where he was getting all the toys together, and it wasn't quite coming.

And we went and watched the opening scene from *Nothing In Common*, which is a really underrated little comedy that he did. And just from that scene I was like 'I need to be alone!'. And I just came out with the scene half an hour later. You're just hearing the voice, when you can hear the voice that specifically it makes writing much, much easier.

FS: Oh well we might come back to that as an idea, later on. But then *Buffy* does come back to you, but comes back to you as a television series. And you're not so horrified by what's happened to her on the big screen that you don't want to have a go. Can you see then that television is the way forward for her?

JW: You know, at the premiere my wife said 'maybe you'll get to do it in three or four years yourself, the right way,'. And I was like 'you have no idea how Hollywood works!'. And then somebody said 'it could be a TV show,'. And my agent... I had been working in TV and then I had written this spec., and I got tired of working in TV, the disasters... and he said 'please don't leave television and do *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*,'.

But I did, and I started working on scripts, *Toy Story* and *Speed*, and then the idea of doing *Buffy* as a show came up and I started mulling that and got really obsessed with it. He was like 'please don't leave movies and do *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*,'. But I was like 'I've already started writing it in my head,' and he was like 'oh, okay,'. He knew that that's the trick.

And it was just the idea, not just the character because the movie was small ambition. It was to turn something on its head, almost a pastiche. Of the TV show I thought a show needs something more than that, it needs some kind of real meaning that you can dig into for a while; structure that you can sustain for years and years. And the idea of the monstrous metaphor of high school, I just went 'ding!', okay. I know we're in.

FS: Well this is a good moment in which we can see the first clip, which again has the sort of Shakespearean idea: you've got the ensemble, which is quite Shakespearean in itself, but you also have one of those regular things about doubling, or a spell, or people not knowing where they are. This actually comes from season six, quite far on in the whole thing. But you can again see that actually it's quite close to... well you'll all know when you see, you'll know who everybody is even if they don't themselves, in this clip, know who they are.

Clip from *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* series

FS: That is a real sort of Forest of Arden moment isn't it? Everybody thinks somebody's somebody else, and they're discovering. It's quite Shakespeare, isn't it?

JW: I'll take it, yes.

FS: And also you begin to see there the change that there is throughout the series, *Buffy* starts out and she's kind of a chubby teenager, and by the end she's running a dotcom empire and looking very sleek. It's such a change.

JW: Chubby?

FS: Okay, chubby perhaps is a very British word, but she's definitely different. She's kind of girly, obviously younger, a different look, and enthusiastic. And very svelte later.

JW: I'm going to just stare at you..... to me, honestly, the most important thing about that episode – *Tabla Rasa* which is episode eight of season six, oh by the way I'm a huge nerd – it was the first episode after the musical and it

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was incredibly important to me that it be as good as humanly possible because the musical was a ridiculous labour of love that took way longer than they should let you have on a television show to make. Four months to write, and I didn't want it to be one of those shows where they do a big stunt and then you watch them sort of struggling for air.

It was very important to me that we come on as strong as we could the next week and say 'every show matters.'. It was the same thing in the last season of *Buffy*, which was the first season on *Firefly* and the fourth season of *Angel*.... *Angel* was really important to me because that was where everyone thinks I'm going to drop the ball. It kills me to put somebody in front of a television for an hour, to ask that of them and not have done absolutely my best.

FS: And was there ever... you talk about the musical, and trying always to find something that is as good as it can be and as different and distinctive as it can be, were there ever directions that you began to take in and then contemplated doing and then changed your mind? Or that anybody ever vetoed?

JW: I never had serious veto. You go down a path, and part of making a television show is you figure out where you're going. At least for that season, if not for the next couple. You figure out the mission statement of the thing. And then, perhaps, a couple of tentpoles, very important events that you know you're going to want to get to... and the rest you really have to find as you go.

And you let the narrative lead you. If you try to lock it in before you've spent that time in it with the actors, with that particular thing.. the narrative is the closest thing I have to a higher power. It's something that I don't understand, that I have to ask to speak to me: 'please, quickly, we're airing soon.'. And, you know, in season six *Buffy* goes on a very dark journey that a lot of people are not so happy with and some people understand and love very much.

At one point Sarah [Michelle Gellar] herself came to me and said 'I've lost her, I can't find the *Buffy* in this, I don't know where I am anymore.'. I was like 'yeah, I just had the exact same conversation with [executive/supervising producer/writer] Marti Noxon upstairs, 15 minutes ago. It's time to come back. We wanted to take her down a dark path, but then we sort of felt... but you don't know it beforehand. You've got to sort of be in the thick of it and then find your way along.

It's one of the joys of writing television. And then sometimes someone will just quit, and you have to kill them, or send them upstairs – 'I'm going upstairs, to look for my socks,' forever.

FS: Was there a moment when you knew that it was working, when you could just feel that this was something that might run many, many series?

JW: I think early on there were a few big moments. David Greenwalt, who ran the show with me, in the second episode, the witch episode, he pitched the idea that the cheerleader was in fact a mother who was so jealous of her daughter's youth that she had stolen it. It send chills down my spine, 'that is the darkest thing you can say about a person, but it absolutely feels real,'.

And it took us up a notch. And then in the sixth episode, where Xander is possessed by a hyena – well we've all been there – we all looked at each other after the first cut and said 'wait a minute, this is happening,' we went there. The most disturbing thing we'd done, which was a bunch of students eating the Principal, led to the funniest thing we'd ever done, which was Giles having to tell Buffy and Willow that some students had eaten the Principal.

FS: And in terms of the academic analysis that followed, with people writing theses and coming up with all these ideas – was that flattering, or a joke?

JW: No, very flattering and in no way a joke. The other thing I learned early on was not just that people were getting what it was that I was doing, in some cases they were getting it better or differently than I was, but just as legitimately. Everything we did we did with enormous intent. We wanted very hard to be talking about people, and to be building off narrative structures that had meaning to the people, or were there for a particular reason.

Every episode we did we did for a different reason, that was one of the mandates of the show, you never show up to just give them what they've already had. We have to tell a new story. It doesn't have to be a great moral, it can just be the intent of 'remember what it was like when...' but it has to be unique.

And we would talk about the philosophy of the thing, the politics of the thing, the classical structures we were stealing willy-nilly from, and how we would mesh them in our own lives. And the psychology, and all of that stuff was part of building it so when people starting taking it

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apart.... something is worthy of study even if it isn't doing any of that.

You could study *Big Brother*, you could study any show that has a cultural impact to find out why, to find out what it is, what the message is. We didn't want to people to know, we thought they'd just be entertained, we didn't think they'd get that we were working so hard on it. But we absolutely were, and it was having an effect, which in many cases was not what we were talking about when we were building it. So I was surprised, but only pleased because who doesn't want that?

FS: And you referred briefly there to a moral content which there might be in some of the episodes. But it does seem to me that overall there is quite a strong moral framework all the way through *Buffy*.

JW: Well there's a difference between dealing with morals and having a moral. There are some shows that every week [are like] 'that's why you've got to stay off drugs, kids'. We were more interested in; 'well, you didn't. How did that go?'. And politically it's difficult because it was a horror show, and horror it almost inevitably reactionary. Anything you do has to lead to, either your untimely demise or some horrible demon.

But at the same time I wasn't interested in saying 'well you shouldn't do this,'. I was interested in saying 'this is what it felt like when we did,'. Or 'here are five people with the same choice, how's it going to affect them? How do they deal with that?'. So the personal, political sort of became my obsession. Not an agenda that they could spout, but the politics of people interacting and dealing with these issues and sort of finding out who they are by whether they come up or fail.

FS: And then of course there's *Angel* that spins off from that. Did you always think that once *Angel* was there in the series and then he had this terrible issue about his relationship with *Buffy* and the consequences of that, did you immediately think 'a-ha!' we'll spin off here?

JW: "Well no, I mean, *Angel* is sort of like *Much Ado About Nothing* in the sense that it had been broached... this guy seems to be able to carry a scene. And in episode 19 of season two he played a man possessed by a woman, and gave an extraordinarily textured and sensitive performance. And that was the moment I said, 'oh yeah, he's for real, he's a star, he can carry it,'.

There was still no show, until David Greenwalt and I found our metaphor which was basically atonement. Alcoholism specifically. *Buffy* was about finding herself and making these important decisions. *Angel* was about 'well, I've made them, it hasn't gone my way,' and how do you come back from that. How do you realign, how do you deal with finding yourself in the middle of life that you're not proud of.

FS: In the excerpt that we're going to see from *Angel*, apart from the fact that your Beatrice and Benedick from *Much Ado* are right there on screen in front of us – but that's another story, coming later – it also puts me in mind that obviously through *Buffy* as well, there are British characters. British characters turn up a lot in your television shows, don't they?

JW: [in a strangulated British accent] I can't imagine why. Could I be pretentious....?

FS: Or could they represent... well what do they represent?

JW: You know, it's just been so much a part of... my mother's a huge Anglophile, it rubbed off on me, I feel as at home in this city as anywhere in the world. I come to it as often as I can. And obviously, not just school but a lot of the great Shakespearean theatre that you're going to see, they talk that way.

I have a little trouble controlling the way I talk, it changes when I go from place to place, and I apologise for that. I have a Zelig issue. Although by the time I was finished at Winchester I started to talk like this [exaggerated American accent] because I was like 'if you're going to be that mean about me being American for this long, I'm gonna be your worst nightmare on an American,'. By the time I returned to New York nobody knew who I was.

FS: So, okay, we're going to see this little bit from *Angel* in which rather bizarrely he's a puppet at this stage. There's a ripple of recognition already, so let's just play the clip.

Clip from *Angel*

FS: So it's also a commentary on the media as well.

JW: Well, yes. It's a lot of things. It's also an homage to my father because he wrote for *Captain Kangaroo*, and worked at the Children's Television Workshop which produced *Sesame Street*, and running *The Electric Company*, which was the next show they put

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on. So we lived in a very Muppet world, as children.

FS: But never perceived as quite the threat that it is there.

JW: No. They're a little creepy.

FS: I guess that when you're writing, you're writing for the first generation who... even though the previous generation had been brought up with television this is the first generation who had been completely saturated with media and media images all the way through. And that's something that plays into it as well.

JW: I don't know that we're the first. It's been going on for a while. I do remember.. I was 13 and I was in school, and I was sitting alone at a table. It was not lunchtime. And a bunch of other people were sitting together, and they were talking, and I was drawing something, and I listened in and the entire conversation was them discussing episodes of re-runs of *The Brady Bunch* that they'd seen.

And that was it. They were just saying 'remember that one when...!', and I thought 'oh culture, is dead. This is it, this is the end.'. And actually almost everything's that being made now – and this is from the man who made *The Avengers*, so I understand the irony of the thing – is basically a giant dose of 'remember that one when...!', so I think it's been cycling for a while, and now it's gotten pervasive to the point of being a little frightening.

FS: Maybe it's the pervasive point that I'm on about, because there was the point where people watched television, they had television shows just as the previous generation had had, big screen perhaps in common. But actually now it's those images and those narratives are everywhere aren't they, there's a familiarity with different genres and all that kind of thing, that maybe the young generation or even the next generation will have that nobody else has had before.

JW: I think it helped *Buffy* and *Angel*, because there are obviously a ton of pop culture references. I was known so much for pop culture references that I made *Firefly* so that I could stop making them. Not just for that, but it was refreshing not to be a part of that. But the references we made were not just in the dialogue but in the genres that we were either spoofing or using or mixing.

And what was great was that audiences were familiar enough with them to go along with

that. Everything that I've done has been difficult to sell, pretty much, to an executive. With the exception of *The Avengers*, which pre-existed me. But original ideas they're always like 'err, I don't see how you could mix those things...'. Audiences have never had a problem with it. Even if they haven't seen it before.

Space western? They're fine. And so we could be broadly comic, we could be tragic, we could be weird, we could be political, we could be anything and they were on board so long as they cared about the characters. As long as we were out there swinging.

FS: Why, given then that situation, the audience loved it – and the audience clearly did love it – why did *Firefly* just do the one season?

JW: It didn't do an entire season, it was evil and stupidity. And more than that I shouldn't say, because then I'll start to get specific. But yes, evil and stupidity, and also I would say probably vertical integration did not help us. Once networks were allowed to own the studios, produced for themselves which was against the law back in the day, they only produced for themselves. So the people who worked for the..... and in the case of Fox the man who ran the network was the man who ran the studio. So nobody was in my corner, nobody was there to champion us and say 'well be believe in it, and we've got two powers duking it out to make this happen,'.

There are almost no independent television producers any more. There used to be hundreds and hundreds of production companies. And that went away. So did that great dissent, the frisson and the conflict that actually creates art. Not that there isn't great art on television right now, but the networks are suffering greatly, partially from that.

FS: But for you the challenge for doing the sci-fi western, you said slightly flippantly that it was to get away from all that, knowing that you wouldn't have to make the pop culture references. But actually it's because you had not seen those genres put together in quite that way before? What was attractive for you in it?

JW: It was just simply I had just read *The Killer Angels*, I was actually here on my two weeks that I would get every year. I read *The Killer Angels*, which is a blow-by-blow account of The Battle of Gettysburg, the most significant battle in the Civil War. And it was so rich and

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detailed that I was so immersed in the lives of these men.

I thought I wanted to capture that, that sort of immigrant story, people with nothing, the 70s western kind of 'we take what's on our backs, we're in the wilderness, we don't know who we are yet,' and put it on the Millennium Falcon. Because it's very hard for me to have an idea that shouldn't take place on the Millennium Falcon – or at least some spaceship. It just made sense to me that space would be (what an original thought) the final frontier.

FS: Yes indeed, I could see you going that way.

JW: By the way my unoriginality extends further than that, I actually said 'I don't want to make *Star Trek*, I want to make *Wagon Master* in space,' not knowing that Gene Roddenberry had pitched *Star Trek* as *Wagon Master* in space.

FS: Well there's a kind of purity in all of that. Okay, so *Firefly* sadly is extinguished, but then *Serenity* emerges. It's almost as if there's a little pattern of this kind of setback and then something even better comes along.

JW: I don't think anything would have been better than having been able to make the show for as long as I wanted to. But the idea that my nervous breakdown manifested in a film, I think is rather useful.

FS: But you can do that then, that's what it suggests.

JW: Well you know, that took.. it was an obsession for me. I couldn't stand it, my grieving, I just went straight to anger and denial and stayed there. I was very fortunate because there was no Kickstarting, there was only convincing somebody that they should make it. The Sci-fi Channel said 'it's a little too sci-fi,' by the way. You'll never believe what the western channel said! Nobody was biting, but then Mary Parent at Universal, who had been courting me to make films when nobody was, said 'I will take a run at this with you,'. You need somebody like that, you need a maverick who's in charge. And that was a godsend for me.

FS: And in terms of thinking about big screen rather than small screen, did that require any great adjustment?

JW: You know, it's a different animal, very different, in ways that I understood and ways that I didn't. It's the same storytelling, every time we make an episode of television we

want it to feel like a feature film, we want to hit the big moment of revelation, the big moment of 'yay' stand up and cheer, the tears, the jokes, whatever it is. We built our TV shows like movies, to the point where we actually got a note saying 'you're putting too much visual information on the page,'.

Because a lot of TV deals with faces. It's been wonderful to watch, not just the medium but the technology, catch up to the point where you can go really visual work on television. But we made our TV shows like movies because we wanted to get that resonance. And what's great is that I ended up coming round and saying 'well we've got to make our movies like TV shows, we've got to make them care. Start from character and build everything off of that,' which of course a lot of these films lately that are large, do not.

FS: Indeed. Well we can talk a little bit more about film and TV later, but let's have a clip from *Serenity* now where actually we're going to see a whole lot of action.

JW: I'm comfortable with that.

Clip from *Serenity*

FS: The power of language, that last bit.

JW: Well yeah, the phrase that he says at the end is something that I learned from my Russian don at Winchester, it means 'this is laughter for chickens,' just meaning 'this is absurd,'. It worked for me.

FS: But in terms of the medium and the content, you're talking there about what television can do and what film could do, there's an awful lot of argument now and this year at Cannes with HBO, they had *Behind The Candelabra* showing in competition at Cannes, which is not being show theatrically in the States because it's been made for television... one thing and another, it's beginning to seem as though you're getting this convergence of content, and it doesn't matter which platform.. but it sounds as though you still really care, and feel that they are distinct.

JW: I feel that you can do different things with them, and you have to respect that process. I think that enough people understand that now in a way that they didn't. A lot of filmmakers used to come to television, and just go 'well I'm an artist, and I will show you how it's done,' and make crap. Many television people have gotten their crack at film and it's not worked out.

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Great novelists sometimes get a shot at writing and directing something, and it doesn't work. Every medium is significantly different, and respecting and understanding the ways in which they're different is important. At the end they all share the obvious thing, and the storytelling. You're trying to make something emotional, through words and performances and visuals.

And that's the end game, getting people to feel. If you can get them to think – bonus. I have as much fun in every medium, and they are definitely sort of converging and melding, and people are trying new things. With the internet, the structures... *Dr Horrible* was a different structure than anything I'd done before.

FS: This is *Dr Horrible's Singalong Blog*, which was a sort of three part internet musical.

JW: It was an internet musical, and when somebody would say 'I think maybe you can see a little cable, at the back there,' I would say 'it's an internet musical, and we have six days, so don't worry about it,'.

FS: So presumably, proportionately, you'd have had much greater freedom making that than you would have....

JW: It led to *Much Ado*, and to Bellwether the production company I started with my wife very specifically, because we controlled not just the content on that but the means of distribution. Because nobody knew what to do with it. Felicia Day had been doing a web series, and she played Penny in the piece, she's frighteningly brilliant – she has sort of a *Rain Man* thing – so she understood the business backwards and forwards, and she really helped me figure out what we were going to do.

But what we wanted to do was take something very new, which was internet content which played by its own rules completely, and use it to do something very old, which was to make something that people had to tune into at a certain time. Because when I was young a televised event was a big thing.

This mini-series was going to be on, and we're all going to sit together and we're all going to experience it at the same time. That was sort of going away with the advent of DVDs and binge watching, which of course now in the age of Netflix and whatnot is even more prevalent. It was nice to be able to say 'no, this is going to happen at this time, and that's

when you tune in and that's when the conversation begins,'.

FS: And now with social media the conversation is even wider than it would have been before. And it worked very well that way?

JW: It not only worked in terms of making a splash, it financially it worked extraordinarily well. Not the kind of money that studios necessarily are looking to make, but in terms of what spent versus what we made, far and away the most profitable thing I've ever done.

FS: And do you think there is a future in doing more of that sort of thing? You say you've set up this company..

JW: Yeah I do, people have stayed away from it because either they don't know how to monetise it or they do it badly... that's the case of most things. I think more people are figuring out that it's viable. I think the studios are still going 'where's the money?'....

FS: But they don't have to spend the amount that they would on promotion and all that kind of stuff, because it's different.

JW: Not they don't, and a lot of the best stuff that's being done is sketch comedy, or tiny little videos that people can make themselves. Even *Dr Horrible* was just at the beginning of 'we can afford to do this,' and now, with technology the way it is, most of the people who own a camera – which is actually not that many people since they all have phones instead – can make a film. A beautifully shot and lit high-def film, it's at everybody's fingertips which is, to me, very exciting.

FS: But you were talking earlier about writing, and in a sense writing really in the end gives you the ownership do you feel, more than anything else?

JW: I've done I think four things that I didn't write. I guest directed a couple of episodes of the *American Office* and one of *Glee*, because I loved the shows and I knew the people who were making them in the case of *The Office*. And it was fun. And it was interesting to be that guy. And then of course *Much Ado About Nothing*, I did not write, I confess.

Although I did have to fight the Writer's Guild, because they wanted to put a 'Written By' credit on [it]. I was like 'I really don't think I'm comfortable with that,'. So had to figure out a legal wrangle that I could just 'Adapted by'. But writing it means that you have an

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understanding of the intent that is crucial for a director.

There's a lot of directors who, whether they're in television or in film, they have an extraordinary visual sense and they know how to turn something into a film in a way that is very specific to that kind of storytelling and is not about writing. Because they are not the writer there is always a difference in how much they can see the intent through, and how much they can work with the actors in that way. I don't know how other directors, I haven't been on a lot of sets. But for me the only thing that works with an actor is to know what you want and be able to explain it. That seems to go alright.

FS: And from what one gathers these are not talents universally handed out to directors.

JW: It's difficult. Directing is an incredibly difficult job, because there's no job that prepares you for it. It's basically a little bit of every job. The best thing a director can be is a wannabe, and I am the world's biggest wannabe. If I could sew the costumes I would, if I could do the stunts I would. If I could write the score I would, I finally did.

You need to want to do everything and be in control of everything, and communicate with everyone. There's so many different little skills you need that any job will not give you. So it's a total crap shoot when you get up there, if you're actually going to be able to realise a vision at all.

FS: We're actually going to see a little bit next of *The Cabin In The Woods*, which you co-wrote with an old friend. Here you take all the tropes of the horror genre, and the great thing about *The Cabin In The Woods*, it's a critique and it's a commentary and it's funny as well. But it's also designed to make us think quite carefully about how we react to horror films too.

JW: And hopefully it's a horror movie. Otherwise oops, we made a lecture. Sorry.

FS: So when you started to write it did you just sit down and think about all your favourite bits or all your favourite creatures....?

JW: It is one of the two times in my life a movie has occurred to me that had a third act. It's not a premise, it's not the beginnings, it was 'boom: here's the structure exactly'. That's why Drew Goddard and I said 'every writer has a dream that we'll lock ourselves in a room and come out with a film,' and we did because we understood the structure and we went over it

beforehand so carefully. We were able to basically get a couple of rooms and write it in three days.

Obviously we don't want it to feel like 'oh, that was written in three days,' we wanted to feel the momentum of the passion that we both had that made it impossible for us to stop turning out pages. The stuff like, we can have this monster or that monster, that was the gravy. That sort of came later, that was sort of 'we've got enough done, let's have a quick talk about unicorns.'

FS: Actually it's interesting that you wrote it in three days, because three days is almost like the duration of most of these horror films. They set off on the first day, and so on. So you lived it.

JW: None of the things I do are very sprawling, I always like that compact feeling. *Much Ado* we shot in 12 days. Obviously you're not making something giant in that time, but what you're doing is you're getting – in that case from the actors – a very lived in feeling. A real actual momentum in their performances that doesn't exist necessarily in every film.

And in the case of *The Cabin In The Woods*, the logic and the love and the passion of it carrying through, it never occurred to us to stop. I think my favourite memory of the thing is, we would go through an act every day and then split it up. I'd go downstairs, he'd go upstairs and clackety clack. And going upstairs once and being like 'can the werewolf just run away because the bullets aren't silver?'. He was like 'I was worried about that too,'. Okay. This is a perfect life.

FS: You're in the world, you're in the world. And did you have, when you were assembling the crew to go to the cabin in the woods, were there any types who you were going to have and then you threw out of the bus on the way there?

JW: No, we knew....obviously if anybody's seen the film they know that the archetypes from horror movies are essential. They really are those five, you can have more but they'll always be variations on that theme.

FS: It's a Tarot pack ... so you're got the big tough guy and the nerd. In the excerpt we're going to see, we're going to see them where they go down into the cellar of the unconscious, where we all know that whenever somebody says 'I'm going to look down here,' we all know that they should not have gone there in the first place.

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Clip from *The Cabin In The Woods*

FS: It's fantastic... he is such a fantastic character, all the way through you're just really rooting for him. He's great.

JW: Marty in particular, the stoner, is referred to as the Fool. And I think we can pretty much guess where I got that. The idea of the one who sees what the others don't, who says what the others think they shouldn't, is not just a Shakespearean trope but how every writer sees themselves.

FS: But then we're going to go towards *The Avengers* which, in a sense, is the antithesis of the small project, the *Dr Horrible* project, where you have complete control over everything. Here you're dealing with established characters, Marvel characters. You're dealing with big studio system, you've got all of that. Was that the lure of the huge big budget movie, there's what you can do with it, but is it not at the same time, there's a risk that you might lose some of your trademark control over it.

JW: Yeah, there's absolutely a risk, I went into *The Avengers* because I knew Kevin Feige – who was running Marvel – I'd known him when he wasn't running Marvel, when he was at Marvel, so over the years we'd sort of seen each other and I knew that he knew what he wanted to do.

He called me in, and it wasn't really like 'are you interested in shooting this?' but 'can you read what we've got?'. Which is something I do all the time for people. My answer was nothing, but let me think about it, and see if I have an idea of what you should do. And then in the process of doing that realised 'now I think this is about what I think I should do, this is becoming exciting to me.'. And they started to get excited about what I was saying, and so we did this little courtship dance, but what was important was, I was very specific about what movie I wanted to make.

They knew that I understood how specific they were about the ethos and the visual, and what they need from a Marvel film. It's always my intention, when I'm working for a company, to be a company man. To respect the people who are going to give you that much money, or any money, and respect their needs not being the same as yours. Like with an actor, the character doesn't exist when you write it or when they play it, it's in the middle. It's the creation you do together.

And I, as much as I can, have the same attitude about a studio. When they don't know what they're doing, when they don't know what they want and they start floundering and they start getting in the way of their own process, that's horrible and it's frustrating. That doesn't happen at Marvel. The infrastructure really is Kevin and Jeremy [Latcham] the producer, and myself.

I set out thinking 'well I think I'm going to be able to do this, to do what I intend to.' And I was, it worked out. It hasn't always done, so that was very gratifying, because yeah, there is a machine. And not just what they need but how they work. And because we were also behind, we were starting late they had a release date which was also very attractive. This was in eight years of development. This is... five different executives are running the place, this is coming out in two years so go.

But then the machine starts building, and people start doing pre-viz, they start doing storyboards, they start dialling in stunts, and you've got to stay ahead of all of that to make sure that you still have a personal vision at all. And there were definitely times when I thought 'I'm nowhere to be found in this film,' or I have to cut all the stuff that really is me.

And partially that was helped by *Much Ado*, because right at the beginning of the editing process is when I shot *Much Ado*, and it just got me back in touch with 'oh yeah, I love this job.'. And I should remember that. And also it's not about me, it's about *The Avengers*, it's about the story that people are there to see.

Going back in and having cut out a bunch of stuff I realised it's an old story, and I don't know who it was [but] it was told to me by Rainn Wilson on *The Office*, which was an editor talking 'you try to figure out where in the scene to put the shot of the blue light bulb. You put it in every different place and it doesn't work, and finally you pull it and you realise the entire room is blue.'. It's the same for the director.

I had begun to think this was an impersonal work, I had made this commercial movie, and then after I had taken out all my beloved little things and just left in what was necessary for *The Avengers* it's so my movie. It's so the way I creative write, it's so what I wanted to say. And the fact that I had lost sight of that is not uncommon, but it was *Much Ado* that saved me there.

FS: And part of the balancing act, I don't know whether this was one of the things that appealed to you, was precisely about making

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these superheroes real and a bit scrappy somehow, and getting that kind of dynamic between them that actually was missing from some of the big, glossy superhero pictures.

JW: I found them all a bit clean, and the first thing I told them was that superhero movies tend to be an origin and then they fight someone slightly stronger than they are, maybe similar powers, and then you're done. And they always seem to not quite take off. I was like, if you're going to have all of these heroes and they're that strong and there's that many of them, this has to be a war movie.

We have to put them through their paces unbearably, so that you really think they might not actually get through this. I wanted it to be dirty. The first template that I saw was *The Dirty Dozen*, because *The X-Men*, something like that, they all have a common problem and they can all wear matching outfits. *The Fantastic Four*. The Avengers is a bad idea for a comic, and it's a bad idea for a movie, and that's why I loved it, because that team does not belong together.

And *The Dirty Dozen* is perfect [because] these guys don't get along and that's how they get it done. And then the second movie that inspired me the most while I was shooting it was *Black Hawk Down* which, besides being gorgeous and beautifully shot, it's 'the guy next to me and this is still going on and I'm trying so hard to get through it.'. That feeling is what I wanted to evoke so that you felt a victory, you didn't just feel like 'he punched him the most,'.

FS: And there was of course Thor's nemesis Loki, played by another British actor Tom Hiddleston very much as a British villain, but he also gets the greatest insult for The Black Widow. I remember seeing it an advanced screening and just shrieking with laughter because 'he said what?!'. So tell us about this.

JW: Oh good. I was fond of the phrase 'you mewling quim,' it's kind of poetic. It's also at his most unlovely, for him to be... I don't think Asgard is necessarily a matriarchy, so it didn't bother me that he would be that bald with it. I just thought 'maybe I can get this by the American censors, but no way are the British censors going to let it slide.'. But I guess it's out of common usage.

FS: And nobody questioned it?

JW: Nobody, I was like 'please don't take out my favourite line...', but nobody said boo about it. We did that a lot on *Buffy* as well. Just using, not necessarily using Elizabethan but

British insults that would not have been allowed by anyone if they had the slightest idea what we were saying.

FS: Well actually the clip that we're about see is just the tail end of that conversation. There has been this confrontation between The Black Widow and Loki, but things are about to move on.

Clip from *The Avengers Assemble*

FS: And indeed you're onto the sequel already, yes?

JW: Yes I am, I'm just writing it at this point.

FS: You don't get concerned that the world may have had too many superheroes, even the unruly bunch of *The Avengers*?

JW: If there's a story that's worth telling I think people are alright with it. And no, I don't think there's been too much. People keep saying 'is the superhero genre over?' after every movie comes out. And if it works, which it very seldom does, but if it works....

FS: And this clearly did work, and was fantastically successful.

JW: Yeah, that's alright too. Then it is a form of spectacle that people are still interested in. It has resonance in America particularly because we're dealing with a generation who grew up reading these things, and they are a kind of American iconography, but at the same time my intent was to make a summer movie that was like the ones that I loved when I was young, Indiana Jones and whatnot, that wasn't exact formula: 'blow up, blow up, blow up, blow up, explode, blow up,'.

And the fact that Marvel let me spend so much time with character... there's an entire reel of this movie where people are just sitting around and talking. Kevin Feige mentioned that. He said 'they're all just sitting around talking – cool!'. He was completely on board with letting the character moments breathe and what we were trying to accomplish with all of them happen rhythmically, so that when there was 'blow up, blow up, blow up, blow up, explode, blow up,' people were invested.

FS: And you mentioned earlier that when you were about to start editing that actually you did *Much Ado* [then]. So you filmed it in 12 days, you filmed it in your own home, but this is as I understand a kind of extension of a process that's gone over a number of years where you

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and a group of friends, colleagues, actors, have got together and read Shakespeare.

JW: Yes, we did it a great deal before my children were born. Not so much after. Though still occasionally. It was when we were making the shows, and we were talking about how much we loved it. And it's not a muscle that people get to flex.

Writers had studied it, a lot of the actors were trained classically, or just interested, so we thought 'let's just give it a go'. It just became a regular thing between us, we just got so much out of it, reading and laughing and getting invested and discussing afterwards. And having snacks.

FS: Yes, so why your own home, because it was convenient? Because you'd already done your readings and things there and therefore it felt organic?

JW: I love any event that I don't have to drive to. The idea was, were in the living room or the backyard, it's as casual as it can possibly be. Some of them we did slightly more elaborate things for, when we did *Much Ado* with Amy [Acker] and Alexis [Denisof] I had, in secret, put the songs to music. And those are the tunes that are actually in the film.

So when my friend who's playing Balthasar, Angie Hart, was called upon to sing my brother whipped out a mandolin, her husband whipped out a guitar and she actually did. We didn't tell any of the other people that. We thought little tricks like that would be fun, but in general the point was this isn't elaborate, this isn't recorded, it's not judged, everybody's got their parts just a few days before and we're all reading. It's just us, it's just fun.

FS: Okay, fun to do, but when you were editing, when you were looking at the final thing what did you think? Did you think that it had brought something out about Shakespeare that you had not seen in another production?

JW: Well I was talking about the readings, not the film itself. The film itself is a different animal, because when Amy and Alexis read *Much Ado* I said 'we're going to film something. They should be Beatrice and Benedick, and *Much Ado* would be a perfect film because it's all in one location, and your wife conveniently built one.

I was in love with the house and really wanted to film something there no matter what. We had started a micro budget studio and it was

her to said at the end of *The Avengers*, instead of going on vacation, this is what you should do to relax. You should make another film. She knew me better than I did myself, not for the first time.

But the reason I hadn't done it for many years before, even though I said 'I'd love to film them doing this,' and it all works out, everything in place as I said with *Angel*, it wasn't until I understood it. And she said 'well look, understand it will you, because we have the slot, I have a crew, you have a cast, you can do this. So look at the text again....'

And I did, and that's when it unfolded, and that's when I realised I'd always seen it as very amusing. I'd always been suckered by the *About Nothing* title. And since I want everything I do to have some kind of meaning or intent beyond just spinning a yarn, I want people to relate to it on a level that really matters.

And when I saw how I related to all the characters, and not just Beatrice and Benedick, when I looked beyond them to not just Claudio and Hero, but Borachio and Margaret and Leonato. All of these people, I began to understand them and hear them all speaking and realised that every part of this play is a very coherent, whole deconstruction of the idea of romance and what's expected of us.

It's hilarious but also dark, and it just started to speak to me in a way that no production I had ever seen had spoken to me, and that's when I realised I do actually have a film to make. Because it wasn't enough to just point the cameras at the people, although stylistically that's pretty much how we did it.

It had to be something about that I had to say. And the great thing about Shakespeare, the reason it keeps coming back is.... I've definitely seen productions where clearly nobody had anything to say. But the old question is, is Hamlet mad? Well how do you feel that day? And who's playing him. It's that for me, it's like, it's my turn to interpret this and he lets you bring yourself to it because he's done so much of the work for you.

FS: Well we're just going to see a little excerpt, really just to give you a flavour if you've not yet seen it. Give you a flavour of the pace and the style and the way that it's done.

Clip of *Much Ado About Nothing*

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FS: Well, at that point I'm going to throw it open to questions from the audience. We've got time for two or three questions.

Question: Hi Joss, you talked a bit about the differences about writing for film and TV, I just wondered if you could talk about the differences in multi part storytelling, because obviously you've done a lot of that on TV and now with *The Avengers* sequel you're doing that again, and obviously you wrote *Alien: Resurrection*. How does it work when you sit down to write a movie sequel versus a second episode or a second series.

JW: It's very similar in that you're expanding upon something that already exists. With television that can go on for years. With movies I haven't done a lot of it, but the idea is always 'make a new movie.'. I never want to make part two of anything. I've still angry that *The Empire Strikes Back* ends with Han frozen in carbonite, because I come out without a sense of completion.

I come out saying, first of all I have to wait three years, and future me has visited me to tell me it's going to suck. To me that's not a film, it has to be complete. A long time ago I said that a film is an answer and a TV show is a question, because on a TV show you are constantly looking for more, and finding more.

On a movie you've got to take everything out and distil it to its finest essence. When you're into the sequel of a movie you're sort of a little bit of both worlds. You are expecting that people know something about what's going on, but you have to assume that some don't. And you want this to work on that level as well.

It's honestly the hardest thing about it, and really structurally. With *Serenity* I had to assume that nobody had ever seen *Firefly*, but I couldn't repeat them meeting each other. I couldn't tell the same story. I'm never interested in telling... that's why *Buffy* the TV show doesn't begin with an origin, because I've done that.

So I had 10 people who all knew each other already, and I had to introduce them to the audience and bring them on board with every single one of them. And that was a nightmare. I thought I would never do that again, and then my next movie was *The Avengers*. So, well done me.

Question: Hi Joss, I'm a volunteer at the Cinema Museum in south London, I was just wondering if you were aware of a little TV

programme we've got here called *Doctor Who*?

JW: *Doctor Who*?

Questioner: The present actor, Matt Smith, is leaving – who would you cast as the new *Doctor Who*?

JW: This is the way you make all your friends angry, by mentioning one of them. His career is in a place where I don't think that's what he's going to choose to do, but I vote Hiddleston.

Question: Hi, I wrote my thesis on *Buffy* and actually got a job afterwards, so do I owe you a fee or anything?

JW: Yes, my lawyers will be in touch.

Question: The fan base of your shows is practically as famous than the shows themselves, with their devotion and everything. When you first started writing *Buffy* and everything like that, did you ever dream that you would have such a devoted fan base for everything?

JW: Well I dreamed it... I came at a very fortuitous time because internet communities were just starting to happen and people were just starting to care who made television shows at all. And writers could become quasi celebrities in a way that they never had before, so I hadn't really in my head [thought] the kind of relationship I have with the fans would exist. But you only ever write something hoping that people connect with it, that it will not entertain but move them and that they will internalise it. That they will make it a part of their lives. That's what every writer wants. So I'm not tired of it.

Question: Hello, it sounds like *Much Ado About Nothing* was at the back of your mind for a very long time, and a lot of your characters are obviously very memorable. I'm wondering if there's something that's replaced that, that's bugging you now at the back of your mind, a new project or character that you're thinking about?

JW: There are several, but there isn't one that I'm like, now I've absolutely got to do this one... there are many and I'm sort of leaving it that way. I want to make sure that I give the second *Avengers* movie everything I have, and I also love the idea of, when it's over, not knowing what I have to do.

So I'm going to struggle very hard not to take another job, or not to come up with an idea that has to go right away after June or May of

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2015, because that will be my first vacation and I'm going to try and actually take one this time. And not just so that I can rest, but so that I can improve, I can work on my directing, I can work on music, I can work on these things, not with an end in sight but just in order to be better at them just so that when something does come I am more prepared to accomplish it.

FS: Well, we wish you all the best, although I have to say that your track record suggests that even before you're two weeks into the next thing you'll have thought of the next three things beyond that won't you?

JW: Maybe, just don't let me do them!

FS: Thank-you very much for your questions –
Joss Whedon.

APPLAUSE

JW: Thank-you.