

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with The JJ Charitable Trust

Peter Morgan

20 September 2010 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

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**Francine Stock (Host):** If you look at Peter's entry on IMDB under the Awards section, the entries go on for a ridiculous four or five sides of A4. I checked on one or two other people with much longer records than you and they didn't get much beyond two and a half or three sides.

One of the elements in there is the Emmy nomination for *The Special Relationship* which many of you will have seen over the weekend. You've been defining Blair by his relationships with different people, whether it's with Brown or with the Monarchy. Did you always have in mind that Clinton would be part of it?

**Peter Morgan:** No. When we did *The Deal* I never thought there would be *The Queen*. *The Queen* was a surprise and Blair being in *The Queen* was a surprise, then the third part was a surprise; I never thought we would do that one and you sort of think you'd better finish it off and it hasn't been finished off yet...

I have yet to broach it with Michael [Sheen] who I think would probably kill me and I certainly wouldn't do it without him so at some point I am going to ring him up and say 'Look, I've got an idea [for] how to do a fourth part. 'Could you bear it? If you wanted to wait a couple of years that would be fine because we need him to be a little older.' But he is a riveting character and I don't quite know ...

You know, I wouldn't ever have guessed I'd become a screenwriter let alone write about a politician in this way. I am not a political animal at all, and I don't have a 'Tony Blair thing', I promise. He's a way in to looking at other things, and simultaneously he just gets more and more compelling. He's a spectacular villain, and I rather like him – and that's the ultimate villainy.

**FS:** How many times have you met him?

**PM:** Never. Never met him. I think that would be a disaster. For us both, I think.

**FS:** You did suggest a few days ago that he might have stolen some of your lines?

**PM:** Well, I didn't actually. I didn't say that. What I said was that I gave three possible explanations for why ... one of which was that I may have

guessed correctly, but I doubt it because that scene's written to be cruel to him and the fact that The Queen would tell him how many other PMs she had, one of whom was Winston Churchill, that was a way of her trumping him, of pulling rank. So it seems unlikely to me that would be what she actually said because I'm sure she's far more tactful than that particularly on a day when the man's taking office, for crying out loud. I very possibly guessed the right thing though I can't imagine she would have said that. Maybe he's just confused. History is ever evolving and organic, and I think it's always a mistake to get too rigid about history.

When I did *Frost/Nixon* the people on both sides were so different, their views of what had happened were so different that I kept thinking, 'is this ... which part of this is history? ... which history do you want?' History in the end just ends up being everybody's individual fictions, and Blair has many individual fictions of which this was one.

They brought it up in an interview on American Network TV with Katie Couric, and [Blair] said, 'I've been telling that story for years,' but he hasn't, I can assure you. I've scoured everything he's said for years and he's certainly never talked about that first meeting; we'd have found that straightaway. It's all so vulgar for a PM to disclose what happens with the sovereign; that's completely un-minuted. John Major didn't even tell Norma, as Norma famously complained once.

**FS:** *The Special Relationship*. You're always getting to what you believe is a truth in a situation even if factually it's not what actually happens. With *The Special Relationship*, I guess the truth is: personal relationships can affect international politics.

**PM:** Oh yes, absolutely. In this particular case, here were two guys who naturally got on and then the older brother figure sort of messed up a bit in his private life. Blair has, at least until this point, as far as we all know, an unimpeachable marital record. What do you do when a guy that you so admire so lets you down? Americans were asking themselves the same question again and again and I thought, 'Wow, how interesting to have two people as heads of state suddenly find that as the tissue that's connecting them.'

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There was a conjecture at the heart of *The Special Relationship* that I'm anxious to protect because it was messed around a bit. There was this idea he went a bit mad after Kosovo and that he got the hang of it ... the idea that one could go in, and regime change could be done bloodlessly, and that he was carried around on people's shoulders in Pristina. I think they thought that's what would happen in Baghdad, I'm certain of it.

People were all talking about the oil; I never bought that for a minute; maybe I'm foolish but I think if through the relationship with Brown you've thrown away domestic policy to the degree that he had, there's only the international stage, Foreign policy's sexy, the international stage is sexy, particularly when you are the perceived number two figure in the western democracies. Heady stuff. Heady stuff being carried around on people's shoulders. There's a still a lot of Kosovan Albanian children called Tony.

*(Clip of The Special Relationship with Clinton and Blair at Chequers watching George W winning the US election after the concession by Al Gore)*

**FS:** That's a great fictional set-up, the idea that Clinton is sitting there watching the results...

**PM:** It's the truth. Let me say that again, it's accurate. They [he and Blair] were together except I think on the actual ... no, that bit's absolutely true. Gore's concession happened when they were at Chequers and the next day they went to Loughborough University and I figured Chequers would be the more interesting scene. They watched that live together in the middle of the night. To be honest that's the reason I wrote it. When I found that out I thought, 'Gotta write this'. Too perfect; just the agony of watching it. In the end, if you judge your legacy to a degree by who comes after you, if people elect someone who's pretty similar to you, you can take that as a compliment or as an affirmation of what you've done. So it must have been rather painful for George W Bush to see Barack Obama elected – that doesn't appear to be a direct continuation. It must have been very painful for Bill Clinton to see that and that says something not just about the recount but it does say something about ... they should never have got to that. It's a great American tragedy, that moment.

**FS:** And when Alistair Campbell says, 'It wasn't really like that,' what do you say?

**PM:** Who cares? Honestly. Stop it. I couldn't care less.

**FS:** It's an interesting question because part of the power of it derives from the authenticity, and you say, "Well, they were there ..."

**PM:** People reject it if it's bogus. People have such finely developed barometers for bullshit and they will sniff it if filmmakers are playing fast and loose or if the filmmakers are doing something dishonest or there's no integrity to the enterprise. They'll just reject it [and] go 'nooo'. Maybe they will do it about this. That's fine. Maybe I got it wrong, but that happened. I mean, it didn't happen in that way but do I now feel that Tony Blair was almost certainly never a progressive Centre Left politician? I do. Is it useful for me to use Bill Clinton to say that? Yup. Do I care? No. And was he pissed off at the time? He was. He was probably more pissed off at what happened over Kosovo – that was the one time they really fell out, but I think Clinton emerges with some dignity from this; he ended up with very high personal approval ratings despite a completely catastrophic second term when he should have changed the world.

**FS:** There are other special relationships in this. You deal with the two First Ladies, Cherie Blair and Hillary Clinton. There is a point in the film where Hillary Clinton starts to romp away with it a bit – Hope Davis give a great performance. When you were writing it, you give her a fantastic speech. Do you feel sometimes that the momentum might be going a little bit that way?

**PM:** No. It was lovely to be able to write the two marriages side by side. When, for example, the American President and his wife come to London and they have dinner with a British PM and his wife there is that moment before dinner that we all think, 'Is this ... what's this going to be like?' and there's that moment after dinner when you're undressing and 'How was it for you?' and the First Lady and the PM's wife are always sent off on visits to theatres or hospitals or something... and I thought, 'Ooh, this is fun.' In the end they are two marriages of people of the same age, same professional education. It's a kind of double date

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thing. There was way more but they cut it all out at HBO. It was much naughtier. If there are any HBO executives here, I do apologise.

**FS:** But you're hinting that there might be another Blair thing. What would be the next great definition of Blair? Would it be God, I wonder?

**PM:** No, but I understand it makes sense; Gordon Brown, the Queen, American President... the Pope? I hear that the Pope, not this Pope, of course, the previous Pope, gave Blair a rocket over Iraq. Alistair Campbell will tell me that's all bollocks, but that's what I've heard, that he had an uncomfortable meeting at the Vatican, but I don't really want to write that. No, I'd like to bring it back to Gordon and Tony again.

Somebody asked me the other day, asked if I'd be remotely interested in doing Cameron and Clegg. I can't think of anything less interesting. Or the Milibands. I don't know why it is that the Milibands feel like Spitting Image puppets to me, and Blair and Brown feel like there's heft. I don't know why. It attracts me, it doesn't necessarily attract all of you. I'm sorry in that case, but you don't need to watch.

**FS:** You've had conversations about the need for hindsight when you were first doing *The Deal* and *The Queen*. I mean, how much hindsight would you need for Blair and Brown? How much dust has to settle before you can get a proper dramatic perspective?

**PM:** I think you can take a look at a New Labour experiment coming to an end. I think you could probably write the requiem now but they still look so young, David [Morrissey] and Michael [Sheen]. [Stephen] Frears rang me this morning and said, "Oh, I saw your film, he is interesting, isn't he?" and he started pacing up and down the kitchen. It's always agony making a film with Stephen ... but it is also heaven. Maybe we should talk a bit about how it is to work with directors because the process is so different each time.

**FS:** Obviously *The Last King Of Scotland* didn't originate with you but on the whole most of the things you've done, and this is quite unusual for a screenwriter, have been your thing, *Frost/Nixon* most obviously because it was so successful as a play both here and in America; absolutely your

property. Which puts you in a very unusual position for a screenwriter.

**PM:** It was a horrible one. When people were trying to make it as a film, and the rights situation... Greg (my agent) and I still have sleepless nights about that. It was horrible. On the one hand, you wish for that; on the other hand, there's nothing worse than several people ringing up wanting to do something. It just became ugly and venal, really awful. But Ron Howard... that remains the most pleasant experience I've ever had making a film.

**FS:** Why, what was it about the way he treated you that made it so good?

**PM:** This lost me friendships with other directors at the time ... and created lasting enemies which is really awful. Ron had been talking to me about doing an adaptation of [Michael Haneke's] *Caché* and I didn't want to do it. But we met. I really liked Ron. Ron is a far more intelligent and interesting man than perhaps people realise or he's best known for. Just known for being a nice man... that's a good start, but he's way more interesting.

I really wanted to work with an American, and I wanted to work with an American who understood the flyover states, middle America, who could really connect with that because it felt to me like you have to tread very carefully when dealing with Americans and Presidents, as we discovered with HBO and this thing [*The Special Relationship*]. Very sensitive.

We have a far bigger tradition both of satire and of attack journalism. In America it's very traumatic for them. I noticed it in *The Queen*, when the Queen refused to come down from Balmoral, the country went slightly mad; something about when you're head of state and they disappoint you or let you down. I think it was partly grief at the time but I think it was also ... well, it was a collective madness... but it's partly explained by, well, it was very English.

Oh yes, Ron. He's just delightful. He's made film after film after film with the same bunch of people and so what happens is the only element that changes is the writer, so you're just this bit that's replaced. This huge UFO comes over, just sucks

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you up and carries on, and that's what it was like to be on board Ron's ship. And then at the end of he secreted me and picked up someone else.

**FS:** Does that mean there was less involvement? Just a great machine working?

**PM:** No, there was so much involvement and just the perfect amount, actually. Stephen demands you to be there for everything, every moment of the day; that's agony because it's not much fun sitting around on a film set all that time

**FS:** But he needs you there because you might need to rewrite something?

**PM:** Yeah, and he's right, actually. The truth is he is right. It is awful because it is a terrible waste of time and you go stark staring mad, but he's right. I had plenty of hours to work out what the analogy is, and I'm rather pleased with this one. If you go on a set with Stephen, you make two tiny suggestions a day, maybe one because the script will be very worked out before you get there. He is not 'lucy goosy, shoot it and see how it goes'. No, he's very precise.

If you make two tiny adjustments every day, they can feel like nothing, but if you go every day for 48 days and then go to the cutting room everyday and go to the location scouting which, trust me, you do... say, if you adjust it on a daily basis by 0.1 of a degree and then you were to set the course of that, if you go on a short haul flight you're probably landing in the same country but if you go on a long flight you actually end up on a separate continent by deviating for a long period of time. I think in that gap is both a really valuable contribution that a writer can make but also is the love you feel for the film because of your contribution not just to what's on the page but also to the entire process. The investment that I have emotionally or in terms of abuse makes you love the film so much more deeply.

I think the reason why I also loved *Frost/Nixon* is because – and ask writers here and you do love some films more than others – the hours I spent on the plane, this and that and we filmed so much of it in the real locations and Ron is just heaven. He has two cutting rooms, love that, and they were all joking all the time while we were making that film – 'gee, this is just like making a student film'

and to me it was like the Titanic. I'd never seen so many trucks. It was amazing.

**FS:** So what is the differentiation in the cutting rooms?

**PM:** He's [Ron Howard] got two guys going at once, which is riveting; and then he was confident enough to give me two days in the cutting room with two guys. It was heaven. Dashing between them, saying 'try that, try that' He didn't keep all of it, clearly, but to be confident enough to let a writer do that... Nowadays you've got a press and save button and you've got a director's cut, so Ron was big enough and confident enough to be able to say 'why don't you have a couple of days in the cutting room and let me see what you come up with, and if it's good I'll keep it'

**FS:** So was this specifically for the interview sequences?

**PM:** No, the whole thing. Not that he went home, he was busy doing something. It was really nice, and bits of it remain. Why should a director be able to see it all especially if they haven't lived with it nearly as long?

**FS:** What is an example of an edit of yours you're particularly proud of?

**PM:** [There are] two, actually. Frank Langella, at the beginning, started with the speech they used in the play and I didn't like that; I felt it was really dull, that we should get into the story quicker so I said, 'You should lop all that out.' Ron wouldn't, but he tested it – Ron tests everything – and I said you don't need to test it, Ron. If you prefer it, that's it. 'I'll just test that.'

Then another one was where all the cars come before the interview; he didn't show that. I'd been watching all the rushes and I thought there was this fantastic moment when all the cars, this convoy, come over the crest of the hill and the whole street goes [indicates shake and shimmer] as Nixon arrives.

**FS:** That was the first big American film...

**PM:** Trust me, that wasn't a big American film...

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**FS:** It looked big. Now there's *Hereafter*, which has just been showing in Toronto, a film you wrote for Clint Eastwood. What was the genesis of that?

**PM:** This is really the weirdest thing. You've had as much to do with *Hereafter* as I have. To talk about this will be quite tricky; I've no idea. I wrote a script and I couldn't work out what to do with it. I wrote it and it came out as three separate story strands, and the truth is I'd read both Ruth and Justine Picardie's books, and thought both were sensational and devastating...

**FS:** For anyone who doesn't know, Ruth died of cancer...

**PM:** ...very young, about 32, then her sister Justine wrote about what do you do when the person you love most in the world has just died and you still want to connect in some way without it being insanity, séances or anything. Her refusal to give up seeking connection was really interesting, but I didn't want to do it through an articulate middle-class journalist; I wanted it to be more primal than that. And I wanted it to be through an underprivileged young child who had articulation issues because I thought to be able to talk about what happens, none of us know, but to want to know is primal. And I wanted the search to be primal rather than cerebral. So I wrote this idea down about this boy: what would hurt most? Your twin. Then what would be worse would be if the twins were essentially split, but one was the cell that had everything and one was almost a redundant cell – that is to say a person without... the robust twin dies and the shell is left having never really had to do anything, always having lived in the slipstream. I thought, that's a character I'm interested in, but then it grew. I thought there is somebody else who really can connect with this but doesn't want to because it only came about accidentally as part of an operation.

Then there was that terrible period when we had both the [Boxing Day] tsunami and then the [July 7] bombings in London and there was one particular day when I walked in London and another bomb had gone off and I just happened to be walking against the stream of people that were running from Holborn and people charging towards me were so terrified, phones had gone and nobody could connect with anything, and I

thought I hope I never see fear on this scale in the faces and eyes of my fellow citizens. I thought I wanted to address a fear of death, which is a struggle we all have. So I just wrote this thing very instinctively and I felt it didn't work, that it was interesting but it didn't work. I wasn't paid to write it, just wrote it on spec. I didn't really do any homework because no-one had paid me anything; I'll just think about it for a bit.

Some time passed, and then a very close friend of my wife's and of mine died unexpectedly, tragically young, the godfather of our daughter. At his funeral, an extremely beautiful funeral I remember thinking to myself, 'What the f\*\*k? It just doesn't make any sense,' and I thought I really want to get this out. I had, in the meantime, moved agents so I sent, and how moronic was this, my script to my agent in America hoping for some writerly feedback. Where do we go from here given that this is a clearly imperfect beast? But I am really committed to this as there's an idea somewhere in this script.

He read it and I don't think he was quite sure what to do with it so he gave it to a producer, Kathleen Kennedy, as just a sort of 'this is what Pete's up to at the moment' rather than 'we think we can sell this'; it wasn't that at all. And because she was making a film at the time called *The Last Airbender*, she was on a sound stage somewhere, gave it to Night Shyamalan and he read it – and he may be the one responsible for all this – because he said, 'I really love this, I want to do it,' and when Steven Spielberg heard her talking about it on the phone to Night, he then said, 'Hey, that sounds really interesting.'

So then I got this phone call saying, 'Steven Spielberg and Night both want to do the script,' and I said, 'That's ridiculous, completely ridiculous, stop it now,' and then Spielberg rang me up and he said, 'I have a note,' and he gave me this note and we had a fantastic conversation, sober and focused and I really enjoyed it and I thought what a brilliant note and so I addressed it. I only addressed it because I thought it was really helpful and perceptive.

I handed in the script, they rang me up immediately and said, 'This has taken a huge step back, get on the plane.' So I got on the plane to meet Steven Spielberg... it's a rite of passage –

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screenwriter on his way out to meet Mr Spielberg – you think, 'I do my driving test, I lose my virginity, and...' It's one of those. Can't quite relax into it because it's so ridiculous.

I got there and I was sitting in what is the board room and in came an assistant who said Mr Spielberg would be in shortly I said, 'Right you are.' Then another assistant came in and turned all the lights off, then in he came. 'Hey Peter ...' We had a meeting in the dark. So I am having an out-of-body experience on many levels while we are talking about this... I thought he might have had facial surgery or something and was trying to hide a huge new nose or something. A female assistant said he'd taken to having meetings in the dark recently. As you got used to it, it was very relaxing; we weren't naked or anything; I could tell he was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and had no facial surgery; it was him. And it was a kind of mellow thing. He then said in the meeting, 'I'm so sorry. I f\*\*ked up giving you that note. I clearly don't know what to do with it,' (that makes two of us, I thought), "and I want to show it to my friend Clint.' At this point you're sort of going, 'No, this is a hoax.'

Then I'm sitting having dinner with a friend, Christine Langan, a few months later. The phone rings and Kathy Kennedy tells me Clint wants to do it. So I say, 'Great, can we meet and talk about it?' and I never heard again. That was it. I said the script needs so much work, and I never heard from them again.

(Trailer for *Hereafter*)

**FS:** Was that familiar?

**PM:** Of course it is. He famously doesn't touch a thing and, depending on your viewpoint, that's either Zen mastery or it's just odd. I met him on set a few times and he's the loveliest man. They had a real problem with the availability of actors because he wanted to shoot it at a certain time and when it became clear they couldn't get Matt Damon until January or whatever, Clint, who's impatient to make films frequently and quickly, started reading other scripts.

Apparently, there was one flight he took on the way back from filming *Invictus*, where they flew from SA/London/LA or whatever and at that point

*Hereafter*, because of the casting issue, suddenly was imperilled. He had a stack of other scripts on his flight and during the course of the flight he read them all, and the only one he wanted to do by the end of it was *Hereafter*, so he has a very strong personal connection to it.

When I met him he spoke very movingly about the script and the impact it had had on him, and I think, judging by some of the reviews I've read coming out of Toronto, some people have really gone with that and some people have not, but I have no doubt whatsoever that his passion for it is absolutely sincere, and his restraint will either leave you incredibly satisfied or wanting more.

I think it's a film that will probably divide people but I'm incredibly proud he's done it and particularly because my wife... we turned up on set and there were all these directors chairs which they put out every day – and I had one next to Clint Eastwood, Matt Damon and Steven Spielberg. [At] that point you just pack it in. We took pictures like a pair of naff tourists.

**FS:** Unlike with Stephen Frears, he wasn't asking you if you could change a line here or there...

**PM:** He couldn't have cared less if I'd never have shown up. He never asked for a single thing. In fact, one change that he said to me he'd made were that the scenes with Matt Damon they filmed in San Francisco and in the script it said 'Chicago,' but he wouldn't even let the production people change it on the script to 'San Francisco'; he said, 'don't touch it'.

**FS:** In some ways that's a screenwriter's dream, isn't it, that he didn't want to change anything?

**PM:** No, actually no. I don't think it is. I think that a screenwriter's dream, if one were to be fussy and since we are among a lot of screenwriters, is to work on it in collaboration to the point where the screenwriter thinks it's as good as it can be, and I think I feel there are things I would still like to have explored and done. Would I say, 'No, please don't film this'? I'm never going to say, that but I would like to have spent a month working with him on it beforehand because to be honest with you, the biggest buzz ... by the time the film comes out you've seen it so much – well, apart from this one – that you don't necessarily get a

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pleasure from that and so the pleasure comes in the journey that you take as a collaborative artist. Otherwise you'd choose novels.

The best fun I've had and the most lasting friendships are with producers and writers and fellow travellers where you create a sort of creative family. That's the career I'm most envious of, the person who works with the same team again and again and again. I envy Ruth Praver Jhabvala, [the late] Ismail Merchant, James Ivory, people who work together.

**FS:** You worked again with Frears?

**PM:** Yes, twice, and I'd like to work again with him but he said no to Brian Clough [*The Damned United*]. Still scratching my head as to why he said that. Tom [Hooper] did a fantastic job but Stephen... it would have come so from his spleen. There's a thought.

(Clip from *Hereafter*)

**FS:** We'll see *Hereafter* pretty soon, I think. Bond... James Bond?

**PM:** Well, that didn't happen.

**FS:** No, what happened there?

**PM:** I started working with them on it and then MGM went bankrupt and they are still trying to resolve that; then after a while you just move on. I've taken on a lot of other commitments now so I can't imagine that one coming back.

**FS:** What for you would have been the attraction of Bond apart from, of course, that great icon thing?

**PM:** I'd have hoped that after the last one that they would want to do some writing. I don't think that was the writers' fault necessarily, but to really focus on a story, to give story primacy and actually take comfort from some of the earliest Bond films where story...

**FS:** ...the reason why people are doing things is quite important in a Bond film.

**PM:** I think so. But they all know that if the last film had made less money it would have been helpful.

It made a ton of money and so there's slightly a sense that it actually doesn't matter, but you know that within the group they really wanted that, and it felt like it would be very ambitious.

If Sam Mendes directs, I have great confidence that will happen. The attraction is to get involved in something after they've done something that hasn't been entirely successful just in creative terms, and I would have been much more intimidated about getting involved if they'd just had a huge slam dunk. It felt to me that what they really needed was some new thoughts and they will have those. Sam will make sure of that.

**FS:** Bond faded away, so what did you do?

**PM:** I live in Vienna and I got a phone call... I did something that was so inappropriate that makes the idea I should ever have been asked to make a Bond film feel so ridiculous... This Austrian TV channel rang me up, the State broadcaster, and said that 2012 is Arthur Schnitzler's 150th birthday and they would I like to write something to celebrate it? My German isn't good enough to write it, so I said no but I could write something in English and I wouldn't be interested in doing an adaptation but let me read some Schnitzler. About a month later I rang them back and said I'd quite like to just try something and let me do it unpaid and see where it goes.

As a dramatist, the structure of *Reigen* – the French have a production *La Ronde* which is probably how it's best known – is very appealing. Schnitzler's play is a series of sexual relationships where A meets B, B meets C, C meets D and so forth... in so doing you go up and down the social scale within a certain city and it paints a portrait. I started writing this during the time of swine flu and just the sense of our interconnectivity, the fact you should be able to feel perfectly safe in Vienna if people are dropping like flies somewhere else... but we're not, we're all absolutely interconnected both virally and internet virally.

Because of the itinerant nature of my life working in movies and television, I now live in almost equal parts – less in America now thank god because of the travel – but London, New York, Vienna and Los Angeles and so I have spent a lot of time in airports in terminals and in cities where there's no cultural, linguistic or racial homogeneity;

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everyone's always speaking everything everywhere and certainly in the First District in Vienna where we live there's a lot of racial homogeneity as there is indeed outside London; but there it is extraordinarily diverse and you hear language, particularly Eastern European languages, everywhere you go.

So I came up with a story that I think for a modern audience – Reigen's structure ABCD etc – can see it coming very quickly and you try and make sense of it while you're watching it. While I was reading it, I got itchy. I've broken it up but nevertheless it is a chain that in this case goes right round the world and it involves six or seven different languages. The only connection it has with the Bond film is that it has about as many air miles as a Bond film. While writing it I remember thinking they must have been mad asking me.

**FS:** Is it different in structure from the way you're describing it from say something like *Babel*, *Traffic* or *Crash* – those multi-stranded narratives?

**PM:** It has a sort of Short Cuts, *Magnolia*, *Crash*... inevitably it has a sort of multi-strand dimension, only in this case and I have no idea how it will work. A multi-lingual dimension could be preposterous to watch but I think it is worth trying because it reflects how I feel things are. You don't get a sense of it when you read the screenplay because it's all in English... well, maybe 60% to 70% of it is in English, but it resolves. The absolute chapeau moment to Schnitzler was that it starts and ends with a prostitute in Vienna, and in the meantime the world has changed just a little bit.

**FS:** And you're mainlining Schnitzler rather than tapping into *La Ronde* or, indeed, David Hare's *Blue Room*? You're going back to the source?

**PM:** No. Not going back to the source. Read the source once, put it away then wrote, I hope, something completely different. It's also not really a circle. It's really wonky, a sort of Cubist circle.

(1<sup>st</sup> excerpt from *360 Degrees* read by three actors on stage)

**FS:** So your interest is really the way people have these sudden meetings, a kind of intersection of lives and the fact that there is always a context with a whole lot of stuff that's stirred up by that?

**PM:** Yeah, it's fantastically revealing to watch that.

**FS:** Screenwriters don't often get the opportunity to hear people actually read out their lines.

**PM:** Best, most important, thing to do is to read it and read it. If you can borrow friends... if there are no friends, read it out loud in a room on your own, [otherwise] it's like cutting clothes and not putting them on; it's ridiculous, you have to hear it read. So much stuff comes out. Usually you've critically underwritten in places and overwritten in others, and to hear what is effortlessly being communicated without needing words, and what needs extra help... You get a dimension.

We did a reading very early on of *Frost/Nixon* just in a room somewhere with people who had no connection with the film, the play or anything. Alex Jennings read Nixon and I suddenly saw how much humour could be in it. The idea there should be humour in Richard Nixon is insane unless you're doing satire and so I did a lot of rewriting after that. All that stuff when he teases and ekes out and cruelly punishes Frost, which is funny... that all was inspired by Alex Jennings' reading. I would say any opportunity you get to hear it read is priceless because you discover what it is. What you've done and what it is are two different things.

(2<sup>nd</sup> excerpt from *360 Degrees*)

**FS:** Any timetable for production?

**PM:** We're starting to make that in January, I think.

**FS:** And will this be one of those productions where you are on set?

**PM:** I hope so. It's very 360 in its construction because one financier is in America, the producer's in London, I live in Vienna, and the director [Fernando Meirelles] lives in Sao Paulo. There are ways of communicating.

**FS:** While we're getting a microphone to the first question [from the floor] can I ask you about Freddie Mercury? Sacha Baron Cohen.

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**PM:** Hmm. That's where my head is now. As a writer, I am meeting rock gods, and I really love it.

**FS:** Have you wanted to do it for a long time?

**PM:** No, I never wanted to do it. They rang me up and I thought it was a very bad idea, then they rang up again. They were very persistent.

**FS:** Why did you think it was bad idea?

**PM:** Because I didn't know what I was talking about, because I thought Freddie died younger than he did, and I was aware of Sacha's age – I think Sacha's a great idea – and I think it'll be really exciting to work with him because he knows my work and he's not expecting me to write tons of gags.

They want this to be dramatic which I'm thrilled about, but I couldn't find a way in. There were problems, to be honest with you, which is a rough one for a writer to navigate. The other band members didn't want to be involved in a film that was just about Freddie so that's very sensitive. At the same time, I didn't particularly want to write a film charting someone's slow death of AIDS; then you have Sacha's age, so given that you can't have him doing stuff before he's 38 and given that he died at 45 after a five year illness that leaves you a very small window.

But, happily, I found a story in the window and it also happens to be a story that goes to the heart of why the band is the way it is, or the way the band was the way it was.

They are quite unusual, Queen, because all four of them were songwriters so there is really a story which goes to the heart of the filmmaking process, actually, and this is not a contrived segue... which is that the shared creative process is very difficult. Queen are very sensitive about this film and me writing it because it will expose some of the rancour and the divisions and the envies and the resentments that come when you have to share a creative process – which is very similar to the filmmaking process where, you know ...

Now how often do you really think that 'A Film By' is a justified credit? I don't mean this as an anti-director thing but it just isn't; it clearly makes no sense at all given what an actor brings to it, what

an editor brings to it, what the composer brings to it, what the writer brings to it. Queen don't like the idea that Queen is 'A Band by Freddie Mercury' – and they're right.

### Q&A

**Q (from the floor):** You've spoken of your involvement as a writer on the film set, how important is it to you? What do you achieve by being Executive Producer on most of your work?

**PM:** You're then contractually obliged, I think, to be involved in certain parts. Though I say I had no involvement in *Hereafter*, which I didn't, I could have asked for and insisted on it as a result of that. It is mainly a protection.

**Q (from the floor):** I am interested in the process that you went through when you first got the idea to write *Frost/Nixon*, choosing to write it as a play rather than a film, and if you've gone through a similar process on other ideas that you've gotten?

**PM:** There's one at the moment where I read a book, a non-fiction book, and I thought, 'Oh this would be interesting.' I don't quite know why I think it would be interesting as a play; it is not confined in any way but I don't think a play's necessarily a play because of confinement. I think that nowadays with the speciality market shrinking to the degree that it has, for a writer to tell the stories that they want to tell, to find cinematic distribution for those stories is becoming increasingly difficult and I think that writers will more and more turn to either long form television or novels.

If you've got an idea you've got to find a way of communicating it. *Frost/Nixon* just occurred to me. It is really a truly appalling pitch, and given that's often the way in which ... the other way, by the way, is not to take any development money at any point ever, because then you don't have to pitch and then you don't have to sell... If the script's good, it'll be great no matter what the subject matter, but unfortunately people, if they're going to pay you to write it, are going to need so many protections themselves, particularly if you're expensive. The more expensive you get the harder it is. Actually just write it anyway if you can possibly afford to.

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**Q (from the floor):** Following up slightly on that question, given that the circumstances in which actors have to deliver their performances in the theatre and in shooting a film so very different, do you write differently for the screen as compared with the stage? Do you feel one is a more powerful medium for your creativity than the other, or are they equally powerful?

**PM:** No. I wouldn't say one is more than the other. I haven't thought that through a lot. I think an idea just feels instinctively like something or it doesn't. I feel more comfortable writing screenplays simply because I've done more of it, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't want to write a radio play, for example.

The only thing I feel pretty confident I don't want to do is write a novel, mainly because I don't particularly enjoy novels. I like non-fiction most of the time and if a story isn't being told brilliantly I get really intolerant in literary fiction. I'm quite low-brow.

**Q (from the floor):** I very much enjoy your work and I wonder whether you wrote many bad screenplays before you started writing good ones?

**PM:** Yeah, I've written some real stinkers ...

**FS:** What was so wrong with them?

**PM:** I've never not tried, but sometimes you just can't do it and then you're in that awful position of half wanting it to be made and half not wanting it to be made because the exposure either way is appalling.

I don't have writer's block sweats because the process I've developed is almost a defence against the possibility of writer's block; it takes writer's block out of the equation. Aline [Brosh McKenna] and I were once on a panel with writers and everyone discussed the process and it was so riveting to hear how the process could be so different with different people.

My particular process is that I work up a treatment because I would tolerate and forgive myself and survive emotionally a stillbirth in treatment form. It's much less damaging to me psychologically in terms of my confidence – all writers struggle with

confidence all the time – than a screenplay not working. If I can feel a story's not working and if I haven't got the architecture right in treatment form then I can often pull out and just say 'I'm sorry this isn't working' or .. I'll often be fiddling with that quietly before I even tell my agents that this idea's quite good or 'do you like this?'

I owe my agent in England so much. The people around me I use a lot to sort of give me feedback and even read stuff in very early stages because you can tell very quickly when people are being polite or if it's a stinker or they never bring it up.

**Q (from the floor):** What was your first break as a screenwriter? What was the catalyst to get you into screenwriting?

**PM:** I was writing plays at university and one of them was spotted, then I got paid whilst at University for writing training films. I felt like a billionaire. I wrote for years making a living, just.

I'd say I found my confidence as a writer 10 years later doing *The Deal* with Stephen [Frears]. That was where I'd found something that I felt good doing and I felt locked in with a group of people... I'm still hugely proud of *The Deal*. I don't know if it's my favourite, but it's certainly... we were watching a little clip from it and it's become even more prophetic. It's got better whereas a lot of films get worse. I think that one made me feel I could do it. It's when I started calling myself a writer.

**Q (from the floor):** You said you changed agents and that was quite a big thing for you. What is the difference between the two?

**PM:** I've stayed with my English agent all the time, but it was the American agent. I really love my American agent. I chose him, and he'd probably hate me for saying this, because he's good company and very clever. He's very good at his job, but that's not why I picked him; I picked him because he would make me feel less lonely. I ring him and my English agent every day; they are like complete buddies on the journey and that's the main requirement I have of them. Of course, they are very good at their jobs, but that's secondary to me. It's very difficult to preserve your sanity as a writer and I think if you can surround yourself with anybody that's helping you stay sane it's really

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important and I need to talk to them for all the bumps, the ups and the downs. They keep me sane.

**Q (from the floor):** This might be a naïve question but I was interested that with *Hereafter* you weren't happy with the script and they went with it and you let them have it. I just wondered why you didn't say, 'No, I can make it even better,' and so insist on a month?

**PM:** I did. I did, actually, and they said, 'Clint doesn't want to do it,' and so at that point you just say, 'OK.'

**Q:** ... and you can let it go even though you know you can make it better?

**PM:** That's a question I would love to have with Clint here and we could just talk about it and he could explain it. The only thing I know is he had an experience making *Unforgiven* – I think it was *Unforgiven* – when he asked the writer to change something and it made it much worse. He had the same experience that Steven Spielberg had giving me the note on *Hereafter* and I think it's something I think Stephen [Frears] also feels – incredibly reluctant, unconfident and terrified of giving writers notes because he's experienced making a script worse. And I think Clint is still afflicted by that and I think he thinks, 'I like this script, I don't want to mess with it,' and I'm like, 'You won't, we'll just make it better.' But he has a really strong instinctive thing that you either think of as being off or Zen about 'just don't touch it, I like it, it speaks to me; that means I trust it will speak to some people when I make it.'

**Q (from the floor):** So do you charge a lot more money if you're going to work with Stephen Frears than with Clint Eastwood?

**PM:** What do you think is the answer to that question?

**Q (from the floor):** I'm curious about when you're constructing scenes between political figures like Clinton and Blair or Blair and Brown. What comes first: the political situations these characters are at or where the characters' emotions are at? What comes first in your writing these?

**PM:** The story comes first, so in other words an idea comes first and it's a controlling idea that's a theme and then the scenes that I choose often span six months or a year. You could choose any number; these are busy people and they've done a lot but I will pick the ones that support my conjecture or give me an opportunity and, in particular, try and find scenes and opportunities where you know it's un-minuted. I'm not particularly interested in transcribing or paraphrasing... I want to go into a situation.

**Q (from the floor):** Do you ever look at minutes?

**PM:** Yeah, we did a lot on *The Deal* and you read people's biographies and memoirs and even comparing memoirs that are written almost contemporaneously you discover how quickly history begins to shift.

**FS:** So have you read the Campbell diaries? And Mandelson's and Blair's? Or will you do that?

**PM:** I will do that. At the moment I am in a Blair-free zone. I am reading a lot about Farrokh Bulsara [aka Freddie Mercury] so I'm pretty obsessed by music, and matters Queen.

**Q (from the floor):** You've hinted that *The Special Relationship* was a difficult production, could you talk a bit more about that?

**PM:** I'll tread delicately. I was at one point going to direct it and then for a number of reasons, some of which I don't yet understand, most of which I do, I didn't direct it. Then because I pulled out quite late, the production wobbled and it became very important to steady the ship and a new director was brought on who had had almost no time to prepare prolifically and they did a fantastic job steadying the ship and getting it through. They felt it would be to the advantage of the production if I had no further involvement. I disagree and I think I could have worked extremely closely, collaboratively and supportively of that director and they obviously took a view that I didn't so there are whole chunks of *The Special Relationship* that weren't necessarily the way I would have done it. However, there were whole chunks that were.

**FS:** Which leads into my wrapping up question. Which is 'directing' ...

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**PM:** I'll never do that again. It's too lonely. What had been going on in my private life – my mother was dying, and she died badly and painfully, it was horrible, so I was in no fit state to do anything and turned down a lot. It was a six month period of my life when I didn't really do very much. So I couldn't do it anyway, but even if I had done it, I would have so missed me, if you know what I mean.

I completely understand why Stephen [Frears] is the way he is. I would so want the writer there, all the time because the writer is a filmmaker and why wouldn't a filmmaker want that company? It can only enrich the experience and it's like the Ron Howard thing – what have you got to lose? Give the writer the cutting room for two days, pay them that compliment. They know the material better than you do and what harm can it possibly do? If you are confident in yourself as a director, it can only make it better and Stephen is certainly like that with his writers. He drives them mad but he adores writers, really, and they are all his closest friends. So find a filmmaker who loves writers.