

BAFTA A Life in Pictures: Hugh Grant  
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**Briony Hanson:** Ooh, totter my way around. Good evening ladies and gentlemen, a very, very warm welcome to BAFTA. My name's Briony Hanson—that was a very big drop, sorry; start as we mean to go on! Ladies and gentlemen, you're all here for Hugh Grant, forever stuck in all of our minds and our hearts, I think, as a kind of floppy-haired, beautiful boy with the perfect English accent who does nothing better than swear with it. Hugh's actually been working for some thirty-plus years in the industry now, making something close to forty feature films and a parallel career in television. He's been the star attraction in the highest-grossing UK film at the box office several times now; his own record for *Four Weddings and a Funeral* was just beaten by himself when he came along with *Notting Hill*. Along on he way he's scooped multiple awards, multiple nominations, including a BAFTA for Best Actor and a Golden Globe for the same. And he's known very much for playing the kind of bumbling, British hero, somebody we can all kind of root for, but alongside that he's just as at home playing the kind of cad or the bounder or the baddie—and never more so, never better than in his current release, the glorious *Paddington 2*, which I know you have all seen and will be seeing again, where he parodies himself, playing that kind of washed-up, bitter, faded, jaded actor looking back on his own life. It's a wonderful parody, and it's a portrait that couldn't be further from the truth. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm so glad that he's here to tell us about his life in pictures: Hugh Grant.

[Applause]

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

Does that bring it all back, Hugh?

**Hugh Grant:** Yes, so many horrors.

[Laughter]

So much to apologise for.

[Laughter]

**BH:** So it's hugely fitting to kind of welcome you here to the BAFTA stage, I gather, because I think you're very first film, made when you were a student, *Privileged*, you had a screening—

your very first screening was here at BAFTA, is that right?

**HG:** Yes that's right, I uh—Mike Hoffman, who went on to make lots of films, was an American student at Oxford when I was there, and he said, "Oh I've got some money together, I borrowed a camera from John Schlesinger—" whose portrait I noticed outside, "and I'm going to make this film. Do you want to be in it?" And I said no because I wasn't very interested in acting at that point. I'd done a couple of sort of plays, but it wasn't my main thing. And then I realised this girl who I really fancied called Victoria Studd was going to be in it, so I said, "Oh alright, I'll be in it..."

[Laughter]

And we shot it, and really—I mean I love Mike, and he's made some very good films, but it was ghastly and deeply pretentious. That summer after I graduated, I got a thing saying they were going to screen it at BAFTA and I thought I'd better go and I got on my bike, came here and watched it and then afterwards some agent said, "Do you want to be an actor?" And I said, "No, thank you very much," because I was going off to do some other bullshit degree.

[Laughter]

And then I thought actually I'd quite like to earn some money before I do that, so I rang them back and said "Alright," very grand, I said, "I'll be an actor for a year," and then I was so shit in my first job, so bad, that I thought well I'd better do another one because, you know, I can't be that bad. And that process has now gone on for thirty years.

[Laughter]

[Applause]

**BH:** So basically it all started here at BAFTA.

**HG:** It really did, yeah, yeah.

**BH:** So, genuinely did you not have ambitions to thesp? You were at college, you were involved in stage productions but did you not really have any ambition?

**HG:** No I mean I quite liked acting, I thought of myself as a great star at school. But no I didn't

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think I wanted to do it as a job, no. I still don't, really.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Were you a film fan?

**HG:** No, not really.

[Laughter]

No I'm a total charlatan in the business.

**BH:** OK, well as a charlatan you've done quite well then. So tell us a little bit about the journey from making those first sort of stumbling steps accidentally onto the stage to being cast in *Maurice*. How did you get there?

**HG:** Oh yeah. Oh well, um, actually it all began with—my first job, I was cast in *The Mutiny on the Bounty* with Mel Gibson and Anthony Hopkins—fantastic, sixteen weeks in Tahiti. And I had my costumes made, I looked lovely, I was very excited, I was twenty-three years old, and then they said "Oh actually, there's a bit of a problem because you're not a member of Equity," and anyway it all went to some tribunal and in the end on the eve I was supposed to fly to Tahiti I wasn't allowed to do it. So that did make me quite cross. So then I went and got an Equity card by playing third shouting peasant, parts like that, at Nottingham Play House for a season, where actually I got a lot of sort of raw material for Phoenix Buchanan.

[Laughter]

I've forgotten the question now. I shouldn't have had that gin!

[Laughter]

**BH:** Brought the horrors back.

**HG:** What?

**BH:** Brought the horrors back.

**HG:** Yeah.

**BH:** No, it was about the process of how you got involved in *Maurice* in the first place.

**HG:** Oh *Maurice*. Well yeah, so anyway, I did that season of stage acting, was very bored. There was another young actor from RADA

who was equally bored and so we started doing a comedy show together, and we did that for a few years and we wrote radio commercials, I was quite happy. And then out of the blue this chance to audition for a Merchant Ivory film came along and I said, "I don't think so, really. I'm much happier doing this writing and performing my show," and my brother who's an evil banker happened to be—I was living with him at the time and he was at home sick and he said, "No, don't be an idiot. You've got to go." And he made me dress up smart and I went and got the job. And so that then propelled me, because the film was quite well regarded it propelled me into more films. I could've gone up like that and picked classy things, but instead I chose to go down like that and picked worse and worse sort of American miniseries. I was always a champagne baron, I don't know why, I've played about 500 champagne barons, always stealing the family reserve and giving it to Nazis.

[Laughter]

Raping my sister, Courtney Cox, raped her. And quite rightly was beaten out of the house by Michael York with a horsewhip. It was good stuff.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Do you remember what you were like in auditions at that point? I mean, were you confident to go in and talk like this, or how nervous did you get? How confident were you?

**HG:** No, no. Very, very, very nervous, yes. And consequently I am extremely nice to people who come in to audition on films that I've been in producerial roles in—it's awful, it's a hideous process and I don't think it ever gets better.

**BH:** Let's remind ourselves of you at your beautiful best in *Maurice*, just for a moment.

**HG:** Oh god, yes.

[Laughter]

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

**BH:** So this is thirty years ago—can you remember what it was like being on that set? I know that there wasn't much rehearsal, there

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wasn't any rehearsal, I think, just a read-through for this.

**HG:** Yeah, it was a double read-through, I remember. Because the first one went so badly James Ivory said, "I think we should do it again," so we did it again. And yeah, I remember being on that set, there was—one of the main problems, I'd just recovered then, but one of the main problems then was I'd just been whacked in the face by a man whose girlfriend I'd kissed, and I had a huge split lip. And there are scenes in that film where you think "what's wrong with his lip?" and there's a—yeah, a huge lip in all the courtroom scenes and things. But it was, you know, I was very nervous, first film. But very, very—it was old technology, you know, there was no monitor: James Ivory standing by the camera and very old school photography of the best kind. Pierre Lhomme was the DP and you know, it was—lighting took an hour minimum for each shot and you got onto set it was Charlie bars and flags and reflectors and it was stunning photography, stunning.

**BH:** And can you remember being directed? And what they were like—

**HG:** Well Jim Ivory is a bit like Frears, who I've just been doing another thing with, in that they're minimal. And they're kind of like idiot savants because they don't really express themselves like normal human beings but they have a perfect ear—in the case of Frears it's an ear. He barely doesn't need to watch the screen he listens and he can hear if something's wrong and then he'll say, "Something's wrong with that line," and then you kind of have to work out why it is that you were so bad in that line. And Jim Ivory was the same, it would be, "Yeah, I don't really like it when you touch your eyebrow, I don't know why you do that." And then you have to work out why you did it, and it's usually because you don't really know what the line meant or something, so you have to convert it into an actorly note.

**BH:** And you were working with people who'd come off the back of *A Room with a View* and people like Simon Callow and Denholm Elliott—

**HG:** Yeah, yeah.

**BH:** You know, people who, you know, a real gravitas.

**HG:** Yeah I know, yes, yes.

**BH:** Was that intimidating or rewarding or...

**HG:** Well that was also frightening, yeah. They'd just had this huge breakout hit *A Room with a View* and um, they were planning to make that, to make *Maurice* with Julian Sands, who'd been in *A Room with a View* but then for various reasons he didn't do it. Had he done it, it would've been more of a frightening team who'd just had a success but actually Wilby was even more frightened than me, so... Comforting.

**BH:** And did you have any anxiety about taking on that film with that subject, I mean given when that was, this is right in the middle of the eighties, AIDS crisis, Section 28. You know, for a young actor to take on a first role as a kind of gay portrait, did you—did anyone counsel you against it?

**HG:** No. No, I don't, no that never occurred to me. I don't know why, it never crossed my mind. I remember being slightly startled to see myself on the front of *Zipper* when the film came out—I think it was startling for my parents, as well.

[Laughter]

But um, otherwise no.

**BH:** That seems really unusual at that time. I mean not least because there were very few films with that subject—

**HG:** Really?

**BH:** Let alone that ended in a happy way.

**HG:** I don't think that's true.

**BH:** Really.

**HG:** Not in the eighties, I think there were lots, weren't there? *Prick Up Your Ears* and—I can't think of another one.

**BH:** There you go!

[Laughter]

So, OK, so the film sort of sent you into the limelight; you went off to Venice, you scooped Best Actor, you were kind of suddenly under the spotlight. Was that—did you then suddenly

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think, "Well actually this thesp business is for me?" I mean did you become more enthusiastic about the idea of acting?

**HG:** Well yeah, obviously because suddenly I was being offered nice, well quite nice parts, and money and I didn't have any of that—well not enough, and so yeah, that was nice. But as I said earlier, I very quickly declined back into the swamp from which I'd emerged.

**BH:** The film's just been re-released, a thirty year re-release. Did you—have you watched it again?

**HG:** No I haven't, I'd love to. Well I say I'd love to—literally I love the photography and I love the production design so much. What's happened to me?

[Laughter]

But it gives me no pleasure to watch myself.

**BH:** And then, so when you were on your way to the dip that you're talking about—

**HG:** Yeah

**BH:** You did a group of films which you've described as Europuddings.

**HG:** Yes

**BH:** Things like *Bitter Moon* and *The Lair of the White Worm* and—

**HG:** Well neither of those were really Europuddings I would say. *Bitter Moon* was just a French production of a Roman Polanski film and *The Lair of the White Worm* was a Ken Russell film made in England. But I did also do these curious things that were fashionable then where you'd have a Spanish director directing a film that had been written in Spanish but really badly translated into English and then with sort of German money or something. And it was always a catastrophic failure, terrible lines, terrible. I remember being Lord Byron in a film called *Remando al Viento—Rowing with the Wind*. You see, even the title makes no sense.

[Laughter]

And they'd translated it so badly, and I'd have to say solemnly, you know, "Deep down in the lake, Mary, there is slime and weed. But when

you look at the surface you see only your own reflection."

[Laughter]

What? What? And they had—because the man who directed it—very nice, Gonzalo Suárez, spoke no English at all, not one word. So we had, they hired a local translator who had never been in the film industry, he was just an Englishman—I don't know what he did, but he was extraordinarily tactless. So that um—

[Laughter]

Gonzalo Suárez would say, "[mumbles]" to him, and he'd come up to the actor and say, "Gonzalo says, 'could you be less wooden?'"

[Laughter]

Awful.

**BH:** OK, so you're not going back there. Um, but just rewind slightly, talk about working with directors like Polanski or Ken Russell, people who are really strong-willed, strong personality directors.

**HG:** Yes.

**BH:** Does that change the way you felt—did that change the way you performed? Did you think that you behave in a different way when you're under the cosh of a director like that?

**HG:** Uh, well no. I mean they're both in a way great directors, but quite nutty. You know, Polanski wants to do not just your job for you, but he wants to do everyone's job. If the props man is moving a cup of tea, "No, no, no. For fuck's sake I'll do it. It's got to go here."

[Laughter]

And uh, and Ken Russell, you know—they're both... I'll tell you what I love about them; they're both proper filmmakers. They made only cinematic films and I love them for that. But Ken Russell also quite mad, and in the mornings relatively normal but then he had a good lunch and um—

[Laughter]

In the afternoon could be quite different. I remember doing a scene in which I had to pick

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up a broadsword and cut a woman in half, as you do.

[Laughter]

I think she was half-demonic, and she was flying towards me, I had to cut her in half. And I remember saying, "I don't know Ken. When I pick up the sword it doesn't feel quite right." And his classic directorial note was, "Fuck how it fucking feels. Do it how I fucking showed you, you arsehole."

[Laughter]

Yeah.

**BH:** Good. So at that point...

[Laughter]

So when you'd had your kind of Europuddings and you'd been working with eccentric directors and you'd been doing some TV that you weren't that happy with—is it true that you were thinking about changing and doing—

**HG:** As ever I was saying "I'm on the way out." And uh, and then yeah, the script came through for *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and I rang my agent and I said, "I think there's been a mistake, you've sent me a good script."

[Laughter]

The same thing happened when he sent me *Jerry Maguire*: I rang and I said "I think there's been a mistake, you've sent me a really good script," and he said, "Yes, sorry, that is a mistake."

[Laughter]

Yeah.

**BH:** Oh god. So *Four Weddings* came and you—

**HG:** I went to the audition, and I remember stomping up the little narrow stairs somewhere in Carnaby Street—it was the Henson Organisation headquarters, and then did this weird audition on a sort of plinth surrounded by Miss Piggy and what's his name, the frog?

**BH:** Kermit

**HG:** Kermit, yeah. In front of Mike Newell, the director, who seemed to quite like me, and uh Richard Curtis, who seemed to want me dead. Really hated me. And then apparently after I did it there was a bit of a fight between them and Newell thought I was right for it and Richard didn't want me at all and then had his arm twisted.

**BH:** Let's see why he had his arm twisted. Can we have a look at *Four Weddings*?

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

So that was the beginning of your relationship with Richard Curtis and Mike Newell.

**HG:** Yes

**BH:** Both of whom you've returned to several times.

**HG:** Yeah, yeah.

**BH:** Can you describe a little bit about how that—I mean you said Richard didn't want you in the first place—

**HG:** Yeah

**BH:** Can you describe a little bit about how that relationship worked then?

**HG:** Erm, well yeah, he really wrote that part in his own image and that's why, when I waltzed in, he didn't think I was him—and he's right. And that's why I—all sorts of things were done, like my awful clothes in that film, especially when I'm not in the wedding kit, were done to kind of muss me up. And they wanted to give me the worst haircut in the world, and those glasses and the worst haircut in the world of course backfired on them all, it became the haircut that would be copied. But that was his real problem, and my problem playing the part was that I could see that it was all very funny and I could see all the jokes, but I couldn't really—I'd never met this person who was—who said funny things, but was also... But anyway, bottom line it was Richard, and once I'd met Richard properly I played him, basically.

**BH:** And how much did they trust you? I mean how much could you kind of go off script and do your own thing and how much was written?

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**HG:** Erm, in *Four Weddings* there's some improvisation, I think, but not that much, partly because there was just zero time. It was shot in thirty-six days in a blind panic with Mike Newell hurling teacups at the wall, saying, "I can't fucking do it!"

[Laughter]

There's whole scenes there where literally we had eight minutes left in our shooting day and there's a two-page scene or a one-page scene to shoot, and he would just say, "Everyone stand against the wall and we'll just shoot you like that." There's a couple of scenes like that, you know, no coverage, no nothing. Yeah.

**BH:** And did you have any—I mean the film is sort of incredible, it's one of the few films where it made a fortune, it won a bunch of awards and kind of all the critics have it on their top ten list, which is really unusual; you usually kind of lose one of those elements. Did you—at which point did you all realise that you had made something special?

**HG:** Well genuinely incredibly late. The film, some of it was cut together while we were shooting, towards the end of shooting, as a sort of lunchtime treat for the crew. And we all went and watched it and there wasn't a laugh in it—well Rowan was funny, the rest of it was just awful and I had to be helped, sobbing, back onto the set. And then when we finished shooting they edited it together and everyone was suicidal, they thought it just doesn't work at all, and we thought we were going to have to emigrate to Peru because it was so embarrassing. Then they had a screening in Santa Monica in Los Angeles and suddenly everyone loved it. It was a total surprise to everyone and then it mushroomed.

**BH:** And then how agonising is it to have that much success and then have to kind of choose what you're going to do next? I mean—

**HG:** I don't know that agony's the word because obviously it was thrilling—

**BH:** Well anxiety, maybe?

**HG:** Yeah, but basically it's thrilling. It's lovely, everyone's being nice to you, it's a huge ego trip. But very difficult to choose the next thing and I horrified my scary new LA agents by

turning every thing down and then finally made an appalling choice.

**BH:** Turning everything down because you were getting the same, same, same types of projects?

**HG:** Well now, I thought they were all bad. But the corollary of that, oddly enough, was every time I turned something down the next time an offer came through it was double the money, because that's how Hollywood is, you know, they're weird. And um, and then yes, then I made the wrong film with very good people, but it was a catastrophe.

**BH:** Describe that experience. That was in America, you're talking about?

**HG:** Yeah. Yes. Well I don't normally talk about this film ever. They'd made huge hits, these people, they'd made *Mrs Doubtfire* and *Home Alone* and all that and well I just panicked because they were paying me so much more than I got for this, for *Four Weddings*, I thought, "Well if I'm getting paid 200 times as much, I'd better give a performance 200 times bigger than *Four Weddings*." So I overacted grotesquely and yes, it's really—it's regrettable.

[Laughter]

**BH:** But the film did well at the box office.

**HG:** Yeah the film did fine despite me being arrested on the eve of its release.

[Laughter]

It might have done better had I spent less time in the Los Angeles police station.

**BH:** But it was a strange experience because actually it did do well, but the reviews were quite harsh.

**HG:** And rightly so, yeah.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Was that a horribly bruising experience, or...

**HG:** Yes. Horrid. Horrid.

**BH:** And did that make you think of turning away from America as a source of work?

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**HG:** Well no because I was still getting offered stuff because the film made money and that's all they care about. Yeah I was offered some huge children's film almost as I emerged from the police station. They just don't care because the film makes money.

[Laughter]

So yeah, and I had this production deal by then, rather grandly one of the other things that seemed to come with a film that's very successful is people say, "Do you want a production deal?" and you know I had offices in Los Angeles that were being paid for, and the deal is if you come up with a project you want to do you give them the first option to make it. And I was determined to see that through and I very much liked the people I had the deal with—they were the real good guys of Hollywood, Castle Rock, you know, it's Rob Reiner's company and they've made really classy films. So I wanted to follow through with that.

**BH:** And with Simian, with the production company, was this literally someone saying to you, "Why don't you do this?" or did you have an aspiration to make a certain type of film?

**HG:** Well no, not particularly. I was quite interested in the way it was all done there, and I think I probably became fractionally Hollywood for a time, you know, with this office. You know in Hollywood no one ever calls anyone themselves, it's always their assistant saying "I have Jack Rubenheim for you," and I remember I had an assistant saying "I've got Hugh Grant on the line for you," and that's probably the time you have to leave.

**BH:** But it didn't give you another perspective on...

**HG:** Well it was riveting, and there were riveting people there, you know, the Rob Reiners and Steve Martin and all these people who are genuinely fascinating and brilliant at their job; I loved all them. But I—both films we made were not really cooked at the time that we went into production. I was under a lot of pressure to actually make films and they weren't really ready. So I regret that. But they're not bad.

**BH:** It's hard to tell the chronology of when you made all that, because obviously those two films came out rather later on.

**HG:** Late nineties, yeah.

**BH:** You then seemed to have almost a kind of hiatus from your own performance until you came back with a bang with *Notting Hill*.

**HG:** Well yes, sort of yes, that's right.

**BH:** And that wasn't a purposeful, you weren't looking away and not...

**HG:** No, not at all, I just went a bit cold and then uh... *Notting Hill* was a big hit.

**BH:** And *Notting Hill* came back and it was a kind of—did it feel like the gang's all here again? I mean it was a sort of, you know, reuniting of the *Four Weddings* lot.

**HG:** Yeah, except we had a lot more money, I suppose, because, well we'd made money the first time and also because Julia was in it. So it was like *Four Weddings* on steroids.

[Laughter]

**BH:** And Roger Michell said that you are the only person who can speak Richard Curtis' lines properly.

**HG:** Uh, well, no. Well... We have a certain understanding, yeah.

**BH:** And it's a very London film. You know, we all watch it in our Christmassy London way, but you were two megastars at that point, you and Julia Roberts, on set in *Notting Hill*. Was that—do you remember that experience? Was that not a bit mad, kind of doing all that on location?

**HG:** Uh... no, no.

[Laughter]

And I didn't feel like a megastar at the time, not next to Julia. Bloody hell, you know. She was the real deal and terrifying.

**BH:** And did the fact that it hit, it really hit the box office... Did you kind of feel like you had the Midas touch again? Because presumably that had been a slightly odd period of fluctuating fortunes—

**HG:** Well yes, and there's not getting away from it that having a hit is a lovely thing and I remember thinking, conversely to what

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happened on *Four Weddings* when they showed us some cut footage and I thought "That's dead," Richard came into my trailer and showed me some cut footage from *Notting Hill* and it had the *She* theme song, and I just immediately thought, "Well fuck, that's gigantic. That's gigantic." It's amazing how important that music is, and in fact how important his general music choices are and how important music is in film. One always forgets it's half the film.

**BH:** And you were playing a lovely—another lovely, bumbling romantic hero. Next, you turned full cad for *Bridget Jones*.

**HG:** Uh, did I? Yes.

**BH:** Yes you did. Let's remind you, and us.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

You can see how much fun I've been having prepping for this. Um, there's a good guy and a bad guy in this movie: Could you have taken either role, or were you always going to be the cad?

**HG:** Oh I don't remember. No I don't think—I don't remember Darcy ever coming up, no, no.

**BH:** But that would have been a different take.

**HG:** Generally speaking I should play all Colin's parts, really.

[Laughter]

And I think Colin knows that too.

[Laughter]

But no, that was what was offered to me, and that's what I did.

**BH:** OK, and slightly more seriously, I've looked at a lot of your films—you've made somewhere close to forty films, you've only made two that were directed by women: This one and the sequel. Is that right? I think that's right?

**HG:** Well... OK it might be.

**BH:** What I was getting to say is, that is a massive... You know, that's a strange thing.

Was it different; is it a different experience being directed by a woman?

**HG:** Uh, it was quite nice. I mean especially Sharon Maguire, this one, partly because of course she was Shazza in the novels, so she knows that world and that humour inside out and backwards and she's very funny. And also because she and Beeban are nice and gentle: I'm very delicate on a set, very jumpy—Frears is the worst for me, I don't know why I keep working with him because there I am, very tense, about to do a scene, and this is how he says action for every single scene, including an intimate close-up of a man in despair: "Alright, ready? One, two, three, action."

[Laughter]

Absolutely terrifying. I think it was Sharon Maguire who used to say, "Whenever you're ready."

[Laughter]

"Commence."

**BH:** And that's the only difference?

**HG:** Erm, yeah. Well I think so. I think so. Sharon was the only director I've ever known who took a day off. She just got ill and said, "Oh I'm not coming into work today."

**BH:** And given that it was such a kind of hot property—you know, everybody knew the novel, everyone had cast it in their heads, everyone had read the newspaper columns, you know, we were all really kind of there with it. Was it—and then you had an amazing script—did you, was it incredibly tight? I mean could you go your own way? How much of a scene like that was kind of absolutely choreographed and scripted to within an inch of its life, or how much could you add?

**HG:** No, no, there was a lot of improvisation. Almost all that is improvised; that last bit with the pants and "hello mummy," all that was just me messing around. And *Bridget Jones 2*, yeah, massively, I think I wrote my whole part.

[Laughter]

**BH:** That's pretty much the only time I think you've gone back for a kind of proper sequel. How did that feel?

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**HG:** Well, um, greedy, really. That's why you do sequels mostly, isn't it? You just have to keep the greed under wraps, yeah.

**BH:** And then you chose not to go back for the third.

**HG:** Yeah. Well, I had easily enough greed to do it; I just couldn't make the character work in that story. You know, her having a baby, Daniel Cleaver, what's he going to do? If that happened, he'd just run away and then he's not in the film. And then they had a version where he kind of suddenly has this transformation and becomes fascinated by the baby and I don't buy that. And I drove them mad I think for a year; we went back and forth and new writers came in and I went to endless meetings, and in the end I just said, "I don't see how he fits in," and then quite rightly they re-jigged it completely, much better.

**BH:** And do you think you're good at reading scripts now?

**HG:** I've always had an extremely high opinion of my script reading ability.

[Laughter]

And I used to boast, you know, I've never turned down a film that's gone on to be a success, and then that all changed and I made some catastrophic mistakes starting about seven years ago.

**BH:** In turning down?

**HG:** Yeah, yeah. Some real corkers.

**BH:** Can you tell us?

**HG:** No I can't because then they went on to be successes and I don't want to be the person saying, "Oh, but they offered me that first."

**BH:** Well you could, we won't tell anyone.

[Laughter]

OK, so then you went, the next kind of big moment for you was *About a Boy*, which again was from a kind of much-loved novel. Was it a novel you knew before you took it on?

**HG:** Yeah, yeah.

**BH:** And had you kind of set your sights on it?

**HG:** Well I had because in a previous incarnation it was Ian Soffley who was going to do it and he didn't really want me to do it so it was a nice bit of revenge that it turned out well in the end. So yeah, but he had a very different script and then it ended up, in the most unlikely way, with Robert De Niro; he owned the rights, Tribeca Films, and then these curious brothers, the Weitz brothers, came on to direct it. And I went to meet them and we loved each other, and it was a very very happy experience.

**BH:** Which is kind of strange because they came off *American Pie*, so you can't imagine they'd have the kind of subtlety that—

**HG:** Well, but they're highly-educated East coast Americans. And in fact Chris Weitz went to St. Pauls here in Hammersmith. And so he knew England and they weren't going to make those sort of cultural mistakes. And then they had a great take on it; the whole visual aspect was clever, yeah.

**BH:** Let's remind ourselves of *About a Boy*.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

Hugh, this film seems like a really different step for you. It's only a year or so after *Bridget Jones* and you look different and you almost sound different and you have a kind of slightly different persona. Did you, was that conscious? I mean did you know you were doing that?

**HG:** Well that's, I think what's called acting.

[Laughter]

**BH:** OK!

**HG:** You know, the Richard Curtis parts were acting, too, because I really am not... People used to say, "Oh Hugh, you know, you are this sort of bumbling Englishman," and it used to make Richard laugh because I'm not at all, I'm quite a nasty, poisonous piece of work, much closer to *Bridget*, to Daniel Cleaver or something like that. And um, so yeah, they're all acting parts.

**BH:** Is this a character you like?

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**HG:** Uh yes, yes, definitely. For various reasons, the fact that he's sort of culturally different—north London, trendy, there's a tiny bit of estuary in his voice. It was all quite liberating and I think I have learned that, that the further away I get from my own cultural sort of roots, the better I am, actually. Or less bad, yeah.

**BH:** And you said that De Niro was involved, his company.

**HG:** Yeah.

**BH:** Was he involved as a producer? And was he involved involved?

**HG:** Not really until we did some promotion and he came over to London. He was very nice, he likes a party; it was me and the Weitzs and De Niro going round and round the clubs of London. Because De Niro's getting on a bit he'd have a nap between clubs.

[Laughter]

We'd wake him up again and then go into the next one, and it was great really—I mean slightly galling because in those days I was quite used to walking into a club and getting some attention. I'd walk in with Robert De Niro and I was no one.

**BH:** And is there any mismatch in a piece like that, which, as you say, is sort of north London—you know, we all hold it as a very kind of British piece. But in the hands of American directors, American producers, is there ever a tension or is that a discussion point—

**HG:** No, as I say the Weitzs got London, or certainly Chris got London completely and the—so it was Tribeca producing but it was originally New Line who was going to finance it and then they dropped out at the last moment and I took it to my old friends at Working Title. So then you've got English producers on it as well, so that was all fine.

**BH:** And am I right in thinking that was the first time you've worked with a child?

**HG:** Um, on an extended level like that, yeah.

**BH:** And how was that?

**HG:** Well he was great. Now, annoyingly, he's a gigantic star. How did that happen? But no,

he's a genuinely lovely person, Nick Hoult, and I hate everyone.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Did you, did it make you—by that time, how was your kind of preparation methods changed? Are you the same from film to film, do you do things the same way each time, or does it depend on what you're making, or?

**HG:** No, well it is pretty much the same because—I don't know what it is, if it's thoroughness or panic, but I really do pick the thing to pieces gigantically before the thing starts. So I'll trawl through the script very, very slowly, asking myself questions: Why do I say that? And why does he do this? And my script is a spider web of notes, and then I create these biographies of the character, which expand and... I don't know if it does me any good at all but it seems to comfort me.

**BH:** And do you ever go back to the writers and do that, or are you doing that personally?

**HG:** Yeah, well if you get really stuck and you think, "I've learned that now—" if the line, you know, really never comes out of your mouth well or you can't memorise it—that's another telling sign—it's worth sometimes saying, "There's something wrong with this line," and then you can fix it. Or I fix it.

**BH:** And are you a kind of one take person? Or I mean do you...

**HG:** Well, it depends, but with comedy I learnt in America, actually, making the film we don't talk about that—there was a lot of very good comic actors in that, and actually I've done other comic films out there, and what Americans do is they come in and they, the script is—you might do one take of the script but really it's about improvising and having ideas and doing different things, and so lots of takes with lots of different ideas; throw things out there. I've definitely discovered that works best, and in editing rooms it's always the line or the moment that was invented in that second that is the one you want to put in the film, and not the one that is pre-rehearsed for three months.

**BH:** And you just mentioned Working Title again, who you went back to for *Love, Actually* very soon after this.

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**HG:** Yeah.

**BH:** Playing the Prime Minister. Was that an aspiration for you?

**HG:** It is now.

[Laughter]

[Applause]

**BH:** Do it!

**HG:** No, no.

**BH:** And of course all the previous Prime Ministers have all referenced your performance in this, so Cameron and Blair have both famously spoken about this performance. Was this a fun thing to do? I mean did it feel sort of ridiculous?

**HG:** Well it was, clearly it was full on Richard Curtis. As he admits himself he had seven ideas for a full film and he didn't have time to write them all so he just put them in one big soup and so if you like Richard Curtis you get a very good dose in *Love, Actually*. And I do like him, and I love being in a big hit film.

**BH:** And then after that you went back to America for a long time. You made sort of four or five things working with Marc Lawrence—

**HG:** I made lots with Marc Lawrence, yeah—

**BH:** Who is a director who is not a kind of named—?

**HG:** No, I just thought his writing was funny. He wrote a huge American sitcom and I just liked his writing. He was a friend of Castle Rock, the company I had a deal with, and yes, I ended up making that film with Sandra Bullock called *Two Weeks Notice*, which I'm proud of, I like, and one with Drew Barrymore called *Music and Lyrics*, which I also like, and then a catastrophe with Sarah Jessica, who I like very much as a person but the film was—I think no film has ever got fewer Red Tomatoes.

[Laughter]

**BH:** But it's fun.

[Laughter]

OK. Given all your experience and particularly your experience in big, commercial, you know, sort of focus group type films and smaller films here, would you ever consider, have you ever considered either writing or directing yourself?

**HG:** Yeah permanently, permanently. It's what I should be doing. I, yes, I just, two problems: One is laziness, and the other is I have absolutely nothing to say.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Is that true? Are people not trying to persuade you to do it all the time?

**HG:** Yeah they have, they have, they have.

**BH:** Do you think you will?

**HG:** I have a file on my phone that says "Ideas."

[Laughter]

Particularly after a drink or two you're like, "Fuck yeah that's it."

[Laughter]

But every time I sit down to write it you think, "Oh Christ, this is quite difficult." And then an acting offer comes in and you think, "Well that's easier I'll go and do that." And that's gone on for decades. I used to sit in The London Library just next to BAFTA here and start fleshing out ideas for films and then thankfully some good acting offer would come in and I didn't have to do that anymore.

**BH:** And what about stage, which you sort of noticeably have never gone back to, which is where you started?

**HG:** Yeah, well my attitude to the theatre has always been that it's lovely for the actors and a bit miserable for the audience.

**BH:** I'm with you.

**HG:** Yeah, I mean, how often do you sit there and not think, "Come on."

[Laughter]

It's great when that happens, but it's one time in twenty-five theatre visits, isn't it? Yeah. So I

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can't quite—but it's certainly fun for the actors, I love it, and um...

**BH:** Are you constantly approached for doing theatre?

**HG:** I was, I was, but I spurned them so often I think that's dried up. But um, it was lovely, and the only other problem I had was that if I got a laugh I was so thrilled I laughed too.

[Laughter]

I used to have to turn upstage to hide my laughter.

**BH:** OK, well let's go back to stage for a moment for a quick look at *Florence Foster Jenkins*.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

This is a film that shouldn't really have worked. On paper this film doesn't sound—you know, it's about a woman who sings so badly that... It shouldn't have worked. But I think because of your performance and because of your character, it does work: You're really sort of drawn into it, you don't laugh at her. Was this a character you—I mean, how did you feel when you read this? What did you—what was your first approach to this film?

**HG:** Well, it was fear, obviously, because it was Meryl Streep and it was Stephen Frears, who I didn't know at the time and I assumed was a really scary, micro-managing—

**BH:** You wish.

**HG:** Well yeah, so it was mainly fear, but I also thought, I have to say that is a good part. Because it was nuanced and... But troubling, too, because I never really... It was hard to say is he a good person or a bad person? Is he out for himself in his protection of her because that's the only world he has and otherwise he's a failed actor. Or is it real love, as well? And I tried to have these conversations with Frears, I met him in a café, and said, "Here's my first important question, I've got twenty: Do you think he really loves her?" "I don't know."

[Laughter]

And I was, "OK, well question two: You know, do you think he's a good person or a bad person?" "No idea."

**BH:** And what did you conclude in the end?

**HG:** I concluded that human beings are both and capable of being selfless and selfish simultaneously.

**BH:** And what does it do to an actor when you're faced with working with somebody like Meryl Streep? I mean, does that kind of—do you up your game or do you—

**HG:** Well yeah, you think I'd better, I better give it my best shot.

**BH:** Did you enjoy the experience?

**HG:** Well yeah, once I'd settled in I think I could say I enjoyed it. But it's still intimidating, she is intimidating because A, she's a genius, but B, she's absolutely dedicated and ruthless, it's like for her it's sort of a religion. And she talks that way about acting and, so things like she says, "I will never, I will never do a scene in which I'm not emotionally present," and I thought, "Fuck I've done thousands."

[Laughter]

Anyway.

**BH:** Does it make you change the way you perform, do you think?

**HG:** Well I did try harder. There's a scene at the end of that film when she dies, and it said in the script "Bayfield sobs," and I remember saying to Frears when I accepted the role, I said "Look, OK, I think I can do this, but that bit where he sobs, forget that, can't do that." And he said, "Oh don't worry, don't worry about that." But I thought, "I'd better give it my best shot," and it was shot, that scene, on the last day of the shoot for some reason, and I really made an effort and I went and locked myself in a room and listened to sad music. Nothing was really moving me much until I got to the Military Wives Choir.

[Laughter]

And they, for some reason, made me howl. But then... Anyway, I get to the set, am I going to cry? Am I going to cry? And miraculously on take one it worked and I did sob, and

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everyone came up and said, "I can't believe you did that," I said, "I can't believe it either."

[Laughter]

And then, to my horror, they cut it out of the film.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Director's cut.

**HG:** Someone's cut...

**BH:** Talking about directors, you've talked a lot about Stephen Frears, and you've had a number of directors you've gone back to time and time again: Are there people that you kind of have your eye on, that you would like to work with?

**HG:** Uh, no, not really. I mean, no. There's obviously directors I think are brilliant, but I'm not sure I would fit very neatly into a Quentin Tarantino film

[Laughter]

Or a Martin Scorsese film.

**BH:** Well you say that, but you could do anything, you're an actor.

**HG:** Oh yes, let's not forget.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Remember.

[Laughter]

**HG:** Quentin Tarantino was nice about me; He did an interview in *The Sunday Times* a year or two ago and was nice about me, I was astonished. But it still would be a tough... I don't know... But it's true, doing more and more kind of, what you might call character parts, I think I'm better at them, to be honest, and they're certainly more fun, they're a lot more fun.

**BH:** Do you not have an aspiration to do a kind of big, all-action thriller or a...

**HG:** Well all action films I think are boring because you only ever get to say, "Nooo," and a stunt man does most of your stuff for you. So no, not really that.

**BH:** Hugh, I think we might have saved the best until last. Let's have a look at *Paddington*.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

This film is about as much fun as you can have at the cinema. Was it fun to make it?

**HG:** No...

[Laughter]

It's all torture. I mean, they're lovely people, very nice. Love Paul King and the guy who wrote it, Farnaby. And um, but you know, it's all just anxiety: Is this working? Is this being funny? And Paul King, who directed it, has a perfect comic ear, perfect, and eye, so he does scary things like if in the rehearsal at the beginning of the day, you know, the line-up, you do something funny and then as ever you can't do it when you're shooting, he remembers and he'll say, "But you did that funny thing. What happened to that?" And then you can't get it again, so it's all anxiety like that. And you know, he's obsessively detailed on everything. This film was literally finished I think about an hour before it went out in cinemas; it had to be pulled out of his hand. But you know, respect to him: It's bloody good, it's kind of a masterpiece, really, I think.

**BH:** And was there ever any point where you said, "No, you know what, I'm not doing that." Not about the film, but like specific things, like that.

**HG:** Well I realise that's not my butchest moment.

[Laughter]

But uh, no I liked it. Oddly enough we filmed that dance sequence first, it was my first day on the film and it was kind of a month before I did anything else on it. And I hadn't really found the character yet; I was slightly out of character in the dancing bit, not the talking bit at the end, that was filmed later, but the dancing bit, all I think I'm not quite in character there. But it doesn't matter.

**BH:** Were there moments where they had to rein you in, do you think?

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**HG:** What's that?

**BH:** Did anyone have to rein you in?

**HG:** Au contraire.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Does anybody ever rein you in? I mean, are there people—

**HG:** Oh yeah, oh yeah. When I did *Cloud Atlas* with the Wachowskis, I played six parts: One of them, I was an American preacher in the sort of mid-nineteenth century, and I thought, "I'm bloody good at this," and after a few takes I remember saying, "Was that good or was that slightly over the top?" and one of the Wachowskis, I forget which one, said, "Rather over the top." And that was very shaming; I had to bring it right back.

**BH:** Are there other people whose views you trust and you test material on them?

**HG:** Yeah, scripts I might send to people, yeah, and say, "Does this work?" Lots of ex-girlfriends get sent scripts.

**BH:** To their thrill... And are you surprised at how well *Paddington* has landed?

**HG:** Yeah. I mean you always expect failure, and it's extraordinary. It's extraordinary to be such a big box office hit and be a hundred Red Tomatoes.

**BH:** Do you feel any more confident now? I mean the way you talk about it is so, you know, "I hate it, I'm frightened." Do you feel—?

**HG:** I'm a bit better now. I was thinking about this, I think I've been acting about thirty-four years and I think I was shit for seventeen and then better for seventeen.

**BH:** Are there particular performances, I mean; this presumably is a performance that you really rate? You must do.

**HG:** Yes. Yeah, I'm glad it worked and I like that. I just finished, yesterday I finished this Jeremy Thorpe thing with Frears again, and I've got better, I have got better. Some incredibly simple tricks which I wish I'd known before, like going for a run early in the morning—calmer. And really that's the only thing you need in film acting is just to be calm, not to have tension in

your body. And sometimes you can't stop the tension taking over but exercise really helps. Simple.

**BH:** That's depressing; I thought you were going to say something else, then. I don't want to do exercise.

**HG:** Oh, well it doesn't show.

[Laughter]

I didn't know what to say.

**BH:** I told you. OK, so I'm going to hand you over to the audience now. Just before we do, can you just side step once: Hacked Off and your life kind of outside of acting and on the screen.

**HG:** Yeah, yeah.

**BH:** Presumably has been, is a kind of—has become a very big part of your life. Strangely you also then had to be yourself, which you never are; you know, we know this, we don't know this. How has that been? How are those experiences, like *Question Time* and you know, speaking in Parliament—how has all that been, being yourself?

**HG:** Well, in equal measures terrifying and really refreshing and bracing, I have to say. And it's just so nice to be in a world where no one's being nice to you because you're a star or ex-star or an actor. It's a cruel jungle, politics, and people are there to rip you to pieces. And this particular campaign, the enemy is quite frightening; if you're up against Paul Dacre and Rupert Murdoch, they're not that friendly, they're not that cuddly as enemies.

**BH:** And you presumably knew that your career might be up for, you know, they can do terrible things...

**HG:** Yeah, but I genuinely don't care that much about my career, I never have. And also British newspapers, it's just one market, Britain, you know. That's the wrong thing to say in a BAFTA interview, but...

[Laughter]

It is one market.

**BH:** On that note, let's take some questions. I think we have microphones on either side so

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hands up. There's one at the back and one down here and then one over there, one at the back there. Lady at the back there.

**Q:** Hi, thanks very much. Great talk, Hugh, really interesting. I really want to know what specifically was so terrifying about Julia in *Notting Hill*?

[Laughter]

**HG:** Erm, well, she was very, very nice. But I think I could see there was some anger underneath and she would be the first, I think, to tell you that. And I think I annoyed her a bit in the end, I think I did, yeah.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Moving on, quick!

**Q:** Me? I did want to ask you about your tap dancing but I've changed my mind. What was the degree or the thing that you wanted to pursue that you were saving for during that first year of acting? I'm curious to know.

**HG:** Oh well I had a place to go and do History of Art at the Courtauld and uh, thank God I didn't. I wasn't really interested, I was just being pretentious, I think.

[Laughter]

**BH:** I did History of Art.

[Laughter]

**Q:** Hello. I've got three questions, so pick a number.

[Laughter]

**HG:** Number two please, Bob.

**Q:** Who's your favourite on-screen kiss?

**HG:** Oh, was that number one and three, as well?

**Q:** OK, you've got one and three left.

**HG:** Yeah. I—that's weird, I used to have to say, "They were all wonderful," but I can't be bothered anymore. Well Renée is good, Drew Barrymore, James Wilby, and now Ben Whishaw. Actually I've got pash rash from snogging Ben Whishaw, which is quite odd,

because he's Norman Scott in this Thorpe thing I've been doing, which is odd because he's also Paddington.

[Laughter]

So I've been sodomising Paddington for the last—

[Laughter]

**Q:** Hi there. What character or genre would you love to play in? Like James Bond or something like that: What would be the thing you'd love to act as?

**HG:** Yeah, as I said earlier the films I like best really involve a lot of violence and death, so in my fantasy world I'm in a Martin Scorsese film, and I can't really imagine why I haven't been cast in one when you think of the natural menace I bring to the screen.

[Laughter]

**Q:** Well I'm just really thrilled that you're here today and it's been great, but I wanted to ask you a question: Have you always been funny? Were you a funny child?

[Laughter]

You know, were you one of those children that was always making your family laugh and everybody else around you, or was it something that just happened?

**HG:** Um, well I did silly voices, yeah, I did silly voices. I mean I wanted attention. Lots of imitations, all through school, especially my Chemistry teacher, who was called Chris Hammond and he spoke 'like that.' And sometimes when I'm really stuck in a role I find Mr Hammond comes out, I don't know, he re-emerges.

[Laughter]

**Q:** Thank you.

**BH:** One down here then up at the back. One down here.

**Q:** Hello, hi. I've got the mic, so I'll talk. I was just wondering, you alluded to differences between working in the US and working in Britain: Have you—and you also mentioned doing some more producing, and I'm

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wondering if you're noticing some of those differences narrowing at all? Is the UK industry becoming more like the US industry, and I think I mean that in a bad way?

**HG:** No, you see... OK, you can divide America from Britain, but really there's always been two things going on with the same technology: One is moviemaking, which is a business, and the other is 'le cinema'. That was always my first question when I did French interviews: "For you, what is cinema?" I'm like, "Fucking..." So yeah, I have never thought... I love good examples of both and I don't subscribe to the view that all big commercial cinema is bad and all tiny arty-farty stuff is good. In a way, prize-winning arty-farty, not that it's easy, but if you had to pick one I'd say it's easier than big, commercial, make people who have been working hard all week and want to actually be entertained entertainment, that's harder.

**BH:** Question at the back and then one here.

**Q:** Hugh, I just wanted to say it would be absolutely great to see you in a Martin Scorsese film or a Tarantino film, so let's hope we can see that very, very soon. Just wanted to say I was a real big fan of your work in *Cloud Atlas*, six different roles, and just wanted to see if you could just tell us a little bit about, you know, how you were juggling those roles on set.

**HG:** Well it was such a surprising offer I thought they were joking in some way. I went to see them just to check that they weren't joking and they said, "No man we love you." And I said, "OK," and I assumed I could do them all. The one I was completely wrong about was the post-apocalyptic cannibal.

[Laughter]

They made me up, look absolutely terrifying, there was blood foaming out of my mouth, and then Tom Hanks comes along and falls off a horse or something and I have to look hungrily at him because I'm about to eat him, and I'm on a hillside in Germany and I suddenly thought, "I can't do this. I literally don't have a hungry face."

[Laughter]

Give me a witty line I could do it but I was terrible as that cannibal I think. But the Wachowskis are great, yeah. I particularly liked Lana, who, no I'm not going there.

[Laughter]

**BH:** Stop right there.

**Q:** Can you hear me? I was just wondering if there are any actresses from the Golden Age of cinema you'd like to have starred alongside? Forties or fifties, or...

**HG:** Oh God, this is where I show that I'm ignorant—

**Q:** Who inspired you then?

**HG:** In the history of film...

**Q:** Who inspires you?

**HG:** Um

[Laughter]

**BH:** Just say Rita Hayworth, just say Rita Hayworth.

**HG:** Rita Hayworth.

[Laughter]

[Applause]

**BH:** OK one here. We're running close to time, so just... OK you've got your hand up, last question there, this here first.

**Q:** I wanted to say that I think you're a wonderful actor, and can I just say about *Sense and Sensibility* because we've talked about all your comedy roles but that's a really moving performance and you moved me a lot, almost to tears. So would you like to talk about something just a little more serious?

**HG:** Oh, well thanks. You're very nice. Yeah there's some comedy in that film too, I hope, but what do I remember about it? All I remember was Ang Lee, who is a wonderful director—unquestionable one of the sort of geniuses of cinema, but at that stage he spoke no English and so it was a strange experience being directed by him, or very little English. And um, I remember the first scene I did was some scene walking along with Emma Thompson and we both thought we were pretty damned good and we went up to Ang Lee who was sitting by the monitor and we said, "What do

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you think, Ang? What do you think?" And he said, "Very... Boring."

[Laughter]

Yeah. He didn't mince his words.

**BH:** OK, there was a final question. Yes.

**Q:** Sorry to end on such a boring question, but I think definitely amongst my friendship group your dance scene in *Love, Actually* is quite the action and was that really scripted or did you kind of just say, "Right, off we go," and down you went?

**HG:** No, well it was scripted that I danced and then I dreaded that scene more than anything I've ever had to do. You know, freaking out, sober in front of a film crew at seven in the morning: No one's idea of fun. And they kept saying, "Shall we rehearse it? Come on Hugh, we've got a choreographer in today," and I'd say, "Oh no, not a good day, I've got a bad ankle."

[Laughter]

So yeah there was no rehearsal and then on the day I just had to go for it. And I did it, yes, I did it completely sober, whereas in *Music and Lyrics* where I had to move around and be a pop star, I did that on a combination of whiskey and tranquilisers.

[Laughter]

Hidden in a 7-Up bottle.

**BH:** Please tell me there were no whiskey and tranquilisers in the *Paddington* dance? That it was all you?

**HG:** Yeah, that's, uh...

[Laughter]

**BH:** Hugh it's been an absolute pleasure to hear you, thank you so much for telling us... Hugh Grant.

**HG:** Thank you.

[Applause]