

BAFTA A Life in Pictures: Annette Bening
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Danny Leigh: Good evening, I'm Danny Leigh, and welcome to BAFTA's Life in Pictures. We'd like to thank, first of all, Audi. We'd also like to thank The Savoy for this remarkable environment that we find ourselves in. We're here to celebrate an actress who's starred in some of the finest American movies of the last 30 years, and that's really no coincidence, because it's almost always her that makes them quite so good. Her name is Annette Bening.

[Applause]

[Clip plays]

Please welcome the real thing, a 24-karat movie star: Annette Bening.

[Applause]

Annette Bening: Thank you, thank you. Hello, thank you.

DL: Welcome, how are you?

AB: Good, I just sort of missed the chair, so that was a good start.

DL: It's a good start. But it's all fine now. It feels a little ironic, actually, doing this, Annette, because for all your astonishing talent, off camera you always seem quite a private person, actually, and someone who is quite keen on keeping a divide between the movie actress and actually the woman outside of that.

AB: Uh, well...

[Laughter]

DL: I thought I'd give you an easy first question

AB: [Laughs] Exactly. Well I think it's always sane to have a certain amount of privacy. And it's good for the work as well. But of course, I think it's trickier now. I don't know what it's like to start out in the time of social media. I think it's tough, I really feel for the people starting out who feel a responsibility to be on social media. I guess you have to be, I don't know. So, yeah... Even when I first started and I remember the first time I was asked to be on a television show, I think it was *The Johnny Carson Show*, and of course I love Johnny Carson, I watched it as a kid, American late night show, but I didn't want to do it, I was just a bit nervous to do it. So, I think there's a certain amount of sanity in it, having some privacy. But then I feel like on the screen, I hope, or when I work, that I'm

very open. I want to be totally open. That's the goal, isn't it? And it's ironic because there's something in the psyche that even when you're an actor or actress and you want to be totally available to the moment and you want to be open, there is a part of the psyche that says 'no, you shouldn't.' You have to learn how to do it, otherwise there wouldn't be acting schools if you could just do it. So anyway, yeah, I think a certain amount of privacy is probably a wise thing. That's just for me though.

DL: I mean you started out on stage. People will probably be aware that before we ever saw you on screen at the end of the eighties that you'd already had a decade on the stage. Do you think it's easier for a stage actress or a stage actor, in fact, to keep hold of their privacy? And maybe it's something about the camera and the screen that we sort of want to know what's going on with the real person?

AB: Is it easier for a stage actor to have more privacy?

DL: Yeah.

AB: I think so, yeah, for sure. And also a lot of it is just that the, the selling of what you're doing on screen is really what generally makes your private life more public. So, yeah, but there's a lot you can do to kind of ameliorate that, there's a certain amount of control you have and there's a certain amount that you have to sort of give up. Yeah.

DL: I mean when you work, or were working on stage, you had this flourishing career, you worked on Broadway. At that point, were you thinking about the movies? Or were you solely concentrated on theatre, and was the cinema kind of an accident?

AB: No, I was thinking about movies at that point. I mean, I didn't move to New York until I was twenty-eight, and I was doing a play and I was trying to get work on a film, whatever, anything I could get. No, I very much wanted to, but I was also very intimidated by it. Very intimidated by it. We had never had any training in that at all in acting school. They just sort of would say things to you like 'well, you know you can't be big, you can't over-do. You have to do less, and also, you look ten pounds heavier.'

DL: Wow.

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AB: I remember they would always say that. And then I forgot about that for about twenty years, and then I realised it again recently. I thought, 'is that true?'

[Laughter]

I don't know if that was ever true, I forget if it was. No, but I was very intimidated, I felt like a stage actress doing, you know, doing things on camera, for a long time. I didn't feel at home on a set. I didn't feel at home just sitting quietly just talking, that seemed so strange, that that was acting. You know, you can speak very quietly like this, and keep it very small, and that felt very weird to me. I was used to being up. The athletic experience of being an actor was so much a part of it, and going from the beginning to the end of the process every time you do it and all of that. So I had to learn. But then, once I... There's a lot of cameras wandering around.

DL: There really are, aren't there!

AB: They're everywhere. No, once you learn to love it, it's such a luxury. And now I love working, I love working in film. And it took me a long time to really feel, you know, like I knew what I was doing.

DL: Well I wondered about that, because obviously, you know, your movie career starts, interesting films: *Valmont*, *Postcards from the Edge*, but then there's—I imagine the first time a lot of people here will have seen you is in *The Grifters*, which is this astonishing role. Stephen Frears, great movie from 1990.

AB: Thank you.

DL: I'm wondering kind of how that came about, and also you've talked a little bit about confidence. And I mean it's a role I would expect that requires a certain amount of confidence to play?

AB: Which one?

DL: Myra in *The Grifters*.

AB: Oh, Myra. Um yes.

[Laughter]

They all do. Well, let's see, Myra. So Stephen Frears was directing a movie called *Dangerous Liaisons*, And Milos Forman was directing a movie called *Valmont*, and they were both

based on the same book, as I'm sure you all know. Ok, so they were both making these movies simultaneously, competing movies. I was in New York at the time, I was in a play, and they both met me for the movies. So Stephen Frears was interested in me playing the girl who gets the letter written on her bare ass, and Milos Forman was interested in me that I might play the leading role, so that was weird and funny and whatever, of course. I auditioned for Milos for months, over and over and he would tell me what to do and give me direction and I would read with different people, and it went on and on and on. Fine, that was great. And then Stephen I met twice and I remember the second time, he said, 'you know, I'm going to go to France,' and anyway he was like 'I have five or six girls who could play the part and I'm just going to see what I want to do.' Ok, fine, so then I didn't get the part of the girl who gets the letter written on her bum, and I did get the part in the other one, which was incredible. And Colin Firth, Colin had done more movies than I had at that point. I mean, what had I... I'd done one, a family comedy. Anyway, so, Milos was great and taught me a lot and he was very tough, and comes from a different school of directing than most Western directors. We were all sort of traumatised by him because we were doing this period thing, so we were all very, I don't know, you get stiff, you think 'oh, people then sat in a different way.' I don't know what it is. You have a thing in your head. So we were all doing that, and he would say 'No. No, no, no, no, no, no. Natural. Be natural.' And then we would, well it would kind of go like this, if you had a line... Say something, say a line.

DL: Hello, Annette.

AB: Hello, Annette. Alright. So he'd say 'no, no, no, no, no. Natural. Hello, Annette.' And then he would do it for you, and it kind of seemed fake the way he was doing it too.

[Laughter]

But he gave you an idea of what he meant, and he was right.

DL: Ok.

AB: Right? He was always right. So, it was invaluable to me, because he was very tough. And Siân Phillips, who became a great friend, who still is my great friend, we ended up living together when we were making the movie—what a woman. We still trade stories about times

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we were humiliated by Milos Forman. Ok, so we made that movie, we arrived in France. They, Stephen Frears and his group, they were just leaving when we arrived. So they went back to the United States, we're there, we were there forever. I mean it was incredible that I got to... I still can't believe that I got to do that movie. Did it really happen? It did. Ok. So then I got back to the US, and literally, I'm not kidding, the day I got back, the other movie was opening. So I went to see it.

DL: Of course, of course.

AB: And it was really good.

[Laughter]

AB: Wow, ok. Now what happens? So then, Stephen Frears was doing *The Grifters*. So he'd seen me for the other movie, and he had made this... So, actually Milos very kindly showed him some footage from *Valmont*. He was thinking of casting me in *The Grifters*. I think someone else might have turned it down. I always forget to ask Stephen that question when I see him, 'Did someone else turn that down? I don't know why, I just would like to know.' I think she did, anyway so I got to play it. Yeah, no, I was quite nervous, but I worked a lot on it, he told me to watch Gloria Grahame. He said 'and can you lighten your voice?' He said that to me. And he would always; he's a great director because he's letting everyone kind of do a lot. He's very good at watching and arranging things. He was great, and it was a very good... it's based on a book. Jim Thompson wrote a tonne of these paperback novels, they're great. There are a lot of movies made from them. He was a wonderful writer. He tried to move to Hollywood and go there once, and I ran into some bookstore at the time I was working on the picture, because I remember picking up a big stack of them, and inside was one that was an autobiography about his own life. He had a really tough life, he was from, I think, Oklahoma, he worked on oilrigs, he was an alcoholic by the time he was a teenager, and super smart. He was working on the oilrig and reading the classics. He's a really interesting guy. And there was another character in that book too that they cut out. But it was based on something really quite formidable. Donald Westlake, a great novelist, adapted it, so all of that helped. And when we worked on it we rehearsed, and I remember being able to go in and go 'Oh you know there's that little bit in the book, could I have that? Could we do this? We worked a little bit on

it that way and it was, yeah, it was good. He's a very confident director and I was in good hands. Anjelica is still a friend and an amazing woman.

DL: Your Stephen Frears impression is kind of uncanny, actually.

AB: Do you like it?

DL: It's a little odd, actually, it's almost like he materialises.

AB: The other thing he would say is: You'd say, 'should it be this or that? Should we do that or this?' He would say, 'I dunno.'

DL: Yeah, there it goes again.

AB: And I realised that was his way, he'd always say that. And that's very smart, because that way everyone's trying to run around trying to do things, and he's quite something. Obviously.

DL: *The Grifters* is a fantastic film. If you haven't seen it, please do, it's a great story of conmen and conwomen.

AB: It's an old movie.

DL: And I kind of want to watch a clip, and it's your clip, really, and then we can pick up the conversation afterwards. So this is *The Grifters*.

AB: From another era.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

DL: Now the first thing that obviously jumps out about Myra is that she's a very, very intelligent woman. And young actresses don't always get to play intelligent women, so I mean I wonder what it was you think a director saw in you, or you embodied, actually, that allowed you to play these very strong, rich, intelligent women, right from the start?

AB: I just got lucky. No I was very, very lucky to get that. And uh, you know, as we worked on it we didn't know quite what it was going to turn into. But no, it was great, and very important for me personally, and very liberating, and yeah, so...

DL: I mean the other thing that jumps out at you is how natural the rapport feels between you and the camera. And having done such a long

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apprenticeship I suppose, or a career on stage, did that come naturally or were you thinking the whole time about where the camera is, and kind of the craft of screen acting, camera acting?

AB: Well I think that for me, and I'm sure it's different for everybody, the way I can try to describe it is that the internal work is similar in terms of the way you think about building the character and your response. Your initial response to the material, of course, is really important. You only get that one first read. You only get that one time when you're in the same position as the audience, when you don't know what's going to happen and it's very important. And then how to go about sort of thinking about it is very similar. On the stage of course, you have to do it many, many, many times. So, obviously you have to find different things to draw from as you go further into the run. Whereas on film you may do it for a day or two and then you're done with that. So you're doing bits and pieces, and that's very different. And the day-to-day life is very different. Your lifestyle is very different when you're in the theatre versus doing a film. And you have to be ready when they are in the movies, and that's very important, and it can be kind of crazy-making, but you, that's the deal, as I'm sure all of you know who are here. It's all about the machines, you know, it's the lights and the sound and everything that they're trying to put together to make a shot, so that when they get everything together hopefully you're right there. And that can be kind of scary. And you have to learn how to work with your own fear. I mean that's always the case, right? And I try to talk to students about that when I talk to students, only because I had an illusion that there's some point that you reach in your life that you don't have that fear or that insecurity. That doesn't mean... It changes, right, as you get older it changes, but still there's a... there is that edge that you want to have that you need to maintain and cultivate, or learn how to tolerate, or however you deal with it. Everyone deals with it differently but certainly we all have it.

And there was an actress, actually, on *Valmont*, an actress named Fabia Drake, who was in her eighties when we did the movie, and she was quizzing me on my lines, I remember that, which for some reason I knew. Well I still thought that if I was looking to figure out what the piece was I would read the script because I had been raised in the theatre, right? So you go back to the play, you read the play. But movies, that's not where it is, it's not in the words there. It's somewhere else.

It's somewhere in the moment that you're making it with the camera and the other people, and... But anyway she had a phrase which she probably got from somewhere else, I don't know, but she said, 'It's called divine discontent.'

[Laughter]

DL: Ok.

AB: Isn't that good? So it's divine discontent. It's that edge one always has if you're working on a creative process. And when you have experience it's great, but you're still always learning. If anything I think you feel more free to learn as you get older, because everything that you were taught you begin to forget, in a great way. I know for me that's true. I went to acting school because I had to, I really had no sophistication about anything: the world, certainly not about theatre or movies, and so was one of those people that really benefitted from it. But now I can really forget it.

DL: It's interesting you said that because I was going to ask, in the context of *The Grifters*, about someone we didn't see on screen, Anjelica Huston, the great Anjelica Huston.

AB: Yeah

DL: I wondered how much you found movie sets were a place where you could learn, and whether you were looking to, so an actress like her who had done a lot of screen work before then. Are you watching, or are you very much immersed in your own performance?

AB: Oh no, I'm always watching, always. And maybe even more so now because, I don't know why, because I can. Oh yeah. Watching very carefully and listening and learning from what they're doing. The really great ones, as I'm watching them I'm thinking, 'how do they do what they do?' So no, that's a great luxury, isn't it? We can always learn. And I'm a great audience as well. I love watching movies, I watched two movies on the way here in the plane.

DL: Anything good?

AB: Yes. I watched a movie called *The Lovers*, which I highly recommend, with Tracy Letts, who's a great playwright. He wrote *August: Osage County*, he's from the Steppenwolf crowd. He did *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* on

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Broadway, he was incredible. And he's been doing lots of work since then, so he's in the film with Debra Winger. And they're playing a husband and wife, I won't give anything away, but they're playing a husband and wife and they're each having an affair, and they're getting ready to tell the other one, the spouse, that they're ready to leave, and that's the beginning of the movie.

DL: I'm intrigued.

AB: It's great.

DL: I'm hooked already. I wanted to fast forward a little bit and talk about *The American President*, which you made in the mid-nineties. This is a film from a different era, where the American President is a figure who we look up to and respect and feel confident in.

[Laughter]

AB: Isn't that funny?

DL: It's strange to think, isn't it?

AB: What an odd idea.

DL: Bizarre, what will they think of next? But there is this common thread, I think, with the characters because again it is... And we'll look at a clip in a second and you'll see what I mean. Again Sydney, the character you play, she's a very intelligent woman. And again it just feels like directors, there's something you're embodying, something you're giving off, where directors feel confident in you to carry off that sense of intellect, really.

AB: Thank you.

DL: And again, that's why I come back to confidence.

AB: Thank you.

DL: I just wonder how much of that was what you were really feeling inside, again? Were you feeling confident at that point?

AB: When I did *The American President*?

DL: Yeah. Because by this stage your screen career has kind of taken wing.

AB: Well I had two children, that's the first thing you always remember is: How old were my

children? I had a baby and a two year old. So I hadn't reached the level of tiredness I would soon reach with the third.

[Laughter]

No, and Rob Reiner directed it... Oh, and you know, this is horrible, this isn't what I should be saying at The Savoy, but I'm going to say it anyway. So the OJ trial was on at the same time, right, and Rob Reiner was obsessed with the OJ trial. And so we had the set, and we shot in a studio, and then right next, in a little room there was a monitor of the trial going on. And Rob would go in and watch the trial and come in and kind of update us all the time on what was going on. Um, well no it was a great experience, it was a wonderful script. Aaron Sorkin wasn't yet Aaron Sorkin, he was just a great writer. And, you know, Aaron's people always are so articulate aren't they, and they go on about something, and they do it really well.

[Laughter]

And they have something to say, and then they do it, and you know. So that's, you know, that's fun to play. No, I love doing that, and Michael was a great pro, and uh, yeah.

DL: That description of the Sorkin script has pretty much perfectly set up the clip I want to play, and then we can pick the conversation up afterwards.

AB: Oh dear, I've given it away.

DL: No, it's great, it's great.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

DL: Now I can't be the only person in the room who thinks there's something so kind of classically old school movie star about your delivery. And specifically there's a touch of the Katherine Hepburn in there. I wondered whether those screwball movies of the thirties were something that you'd gone back to and referenced, because just the speed of the dialogue there...

AB: Yeah, I don't remember thinking about that. I was talking very fast, wasn't I? And talking about fossil fuels, how interesting, wow.

[Laughter]

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DL: Twenty-two years ago. Twenty-two years ago.

AB: That's right, that's twenty-two years ago.

DL: Yeah.

AB: Yeah, incredible. No, I remember we visited the White House. Not for long, but we did we went to the White House, and Bill Clinton was newly elected President and I remember I went to see the Vice-President Al Gore, and I remember he had a book that he'd just written about this subject, and he gave me an entire lecture on the subject, which he was very, very passionate about then, and it really was not fashionable. So, anyway, there's that. So why did I talk so fast? I don't remember.

[Laughs]

DL: Well the script kind of lends itself to it.

AB: I think I... The script lends itself to it, and that seemed appropriate. But sometimes I go too fast. I've learned to slow down a little bit, but uh no, I don't remember if Rob... I don't honestly remember why I talked that fast.

DL: When I've read interviews with you, you are, you're an engaged... You're a politically aware person, but you also seem like someone who maybe chooses to express yourself or prefers to express yourself through the work. Is that fair to say?

AB: Politically?

DL: Yeah.

AB: Yeah, sometimes I speak up and I show up and things and endorse things and people and sometimes I don't. It's quixotic. Because sometimes I really like my privacy and I don't want to be out there in the public, and sometimes I do. So I'm not consistent about it. But I'm certainly a news junkie, everyone in my house is. And we have a lot to study at this point in America, so, yeah.

DL: I can't think what you mean.

AB: I know I have no idea what I mean or what I could be referring to.

DL: I wanted to talk about sometime else American as well, which is *American Beauty*.

Which is this huge landmark movie, but it's interesting because it also seems to have a kind of connection back to you in the theatre, because Sam Mendes comes to *American Beauty* as a theatre director. It's funny to think now he was unknown as a cinematic force. And I wonder with *American Beauty*, which we'll watch a clip from in a second, how much of a kind of, by that stage fair way experienced in your screen career, how much of a helping hand you were to him?

AB: Oh, I don't think he needed any help. He was very, he has this combination, he still has it, where he's very humble but he's very confident at the same time. So he seemed to have very strong ideas about what he wanted to do. He actually did, he wanted to cast me and Kevin Spacey and we were both working on plays in different places, so we had to time it around that, which he was willing to do. And I remember the cinematographer issue, and he wanted... It was a great script, it was there as a script. Very strong. Alan Ball, that Alan Ball had written. So Sam was trying to figure out who to hire as a cinematographer. And he did ask me about that, and he ended up hiring Conrad Hall. And Conrad Hall, as I'm sure many of you know, is one of the great cinematographers. And he'd done many, many movies, including, well, he won an Academy Award for, I want to say, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, but that doesn't sound right, now. Anyway, I'm forgetting. It doesn't matter

DL: We will Wikipedia this.

AB: Anyway, he was epic and he was an older man, and Sam did call me about that, and Conrad I had worked with, and he's an incredible human being. And I always remember he was then in his seventies, and I remember after Sam hired him I got this call, it was Conrad, he called me and he said, 'Annette, I got it!' I always remember that. I just thought, 'that's who I want to be.' He was so, he was so important in the making of that film. And how smart of Sam, to hire a veteran like Conrad, who felt every scene. I mean I remember so well going in, you know, movies are crazy, you go in so early in the morning. What is that about? I don't know, but we always do that.

DL: I hoped you would know, by now you would have cracked that secret.

AB: I haven't figured that part out yet. So there you are, it's very early, you're setting up the

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scene. In this case we would always rehearse some and figure out where we were going to be. And then Conrad would come in with his jacket, and he would sit very quietly and watch. But he was such a feeling man and such a poet, and he added a dimension to the film that I think would not have been there had it not been, had he not done it.

DL: You're being very self-effacing, because I think you also do that. Let's look at a clip from *American Beauty*; you'll see what I mean.

AB: Thanks.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

DL: It's so strange with Caroline, the character you play there, because my memory is that a lot of critics and a lot of audiences, I guess particularly men, felt quite worked up about her and took a dislike to her. And in fact she's such a tragic character, there's something so heart-breaking about her. I mean I'm guessing that some of that was in the script, but some of that was down to you, surely, and what you saw in that character and then brought out.

AB: No, I think people had all kinds of different reactions to Caroline. So, yeah, the script is so rich and I know some people found it very funny, other people would find... I know just because I remember when we were showing the movie initially and we would watch it and we would have wildly different responses from different audiences. So, yeah, it's whatever they brought to it.

DL: I mean I wondered about that sequence in particular because obviously it kind of turns on a dime because there is this dark humour to it, and then suddenly at the end it's a shocking moment, and so I wondered about judging that tonally and how you were feeling, actually, in that scene where you're slapping yourself. It's a very, it's a powerful, powerful moment.

AB: Uh, let's see. I remember reading it, I remember when I first read the script looking at that scene and thinking that's a great scene. And so in some ways that's something you don't think about again, in a way. You are thinking about it but you're sort of setting it aside in away, not thinking about it too much. Except that what happened was with that scene, we shot the scene, and I was... I've got to think

about, I've got to think of more words to express this because nervous isn't quite it, but I was certainly aware that it was a demanding scene. And I remember being; we were in Woodland Hills or somewhere in the suburbs in LA on a street, a very non-descript street sitting in my trailer waiting for them to be ready. They were inside some house, and they, 'Ok, we're ready,' Ok I got myself all ready to go, and went in and did it. And then after I did it I thought, 'Oh god.' That's one thing about movies; it's like when you've done it you don't have to do it again. Well I did it and whatever it was it's over, I don't have to think about it anymore. And then I was in my house getting ready to go to the set, again, I don't know how long, a week later or something, and I can even remember where I was in my house and I looked at the call sheet and the same scene was on the call sheet. It was like a nightmare.

[Laughter]

And I called Sam immediately. I said, 'Sam, that scene, it's on the call sheet,' he said, 'Oh yeah I forgot to tell you, it was too dark.'

DL: No!

AB: So it was Conrad. And Conrad Hall, who loved dark, you know he loves dark. He tries to make things as dark as he can, but he just misjudged it, and you couldn't see me.

[Laughter]

So I had to do it again. So, um, these things happen. So yeah, so I had to do it again. Um, well, let's see, what was on my mind? I don't know that I can really describe it except that, I don't know if anybody in the room can relate to having a voice inside that is very, very harsh, and very critical? I may not be the only one here. And I think Caroline had that. So I think she suffered with that. So if that's of any help...

DL: I mean I'm wondering in that sequence, and also in the film as a whole, how much or how little improvisation was going on? Because I mean, are you generally an actress who stays true to the page, or are there times when a character, and I wondered if Caroline is a character who kind of took flight inside you?

AB: We had a great script, as I said, but we did improvise some. I improvised, in fact I was just thinking, I improvised a little bit when we were doing the house stuff and I was walking from

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room to room. I think I was throwing in a few things here and there. And then when we did this scene, there's a dinner table scene, where we have a big fight, and uh, Kevin and I have this big fight and Thora's just sitting there quietly, and he ends up throwing the plate against the wall. That scene he definitely let me improvise, because I remember very well, I remember improvising. So we did do some. And I love to improvise. It's my favourite thing. There's usually just not time in movies because time is money, and it's usually too expensive. And I'm perfectly happy not to, just to do what's there, but if, and I've done many movies we didn't improvise at all, but occasionally we do get to. We did a lot in *20th Century Women*, which I did last year or the year before, but we did some in this, yeah, we did some improvisation.

DL: I wanted to ask you about *20th Century Women*, which is, you know, an astonishing movie. But with *American Beauty* the thing that stays with me is the cultural impact it seemed to have. You know, very quickly it was picked up not just as a good movie and a great night out, but also movies that said something about America. I wonder what that's like as one of the cast to live through? Because the director kind of takes ownership of a film and gets interviewed about the film and it's seen as a grand statement by them, but obviously you will have, I'm guessing, moved on to other films by the time *American Beauty* comes out. How connected do you feel to that part of the process? You know, the movie comes out, everyone starts talking about it, everyone starts interpreting it.

AB: Well, it's exciting.

DL: Is it still in your mind?

AB: It's very exciting. And I did a few films that didn't have that experience first, so I was very lucky that that happened to me. So I made a couple of films where you work very hard, you make the film, nothing happens. And I thought 'Oh, well that's the worst that it gets? That's ok.' So then when I made a film and then there was this big life afterwards I thought, 'Oh, I see. That's what that feels like! That's very nice.' I went to the park. One of the things that happened with *American Beauty* I remember very well, I was at the park with my kids, my kids were still very little. And so I'm at the park with my kids and this kid on a bike rides up, he looks like he's about thirteen, and he said, 'oh, you're that lady from

American Beauty.' I said, 'yeah,' he said 'I snuck into it five times.'

[Laughter]

And that, I thought, wow. I was really touched. And this little kid you know you could tell something in it just got him. And so I think that was a thing about the film, you know, people of different generations could see themselves in it. And maybe it says something about America.

[Laughs]

So yeah, no, it's thrilling to be a part of that, it's wonderful.

DL: Can you see that coming? I mean are you at a stage now...

AB: No.

DL: Ok, never? I mean I wonder at what stage of the process an actor, whether it's the script or on set or the first time they see something at a cast and crew screening, if they, if you ever know how it's going to land?

AB: Um, I guess the answer is no. I remember seeing it. There was actually a structure to the script, it was bookended by a trial in its original form, and we shot that, and when Sam eventually cut it he decided to take that out and not have the bookends of the trial in the film. And whose decision that was I've heard different stories so I'm just going to avoid that, but just to say it ended up Sam's choice was to not have that. And I do remember seeing the film, I remember really well seeing it for the first time in a small screening room with my husband. And I just, ah, I just thought it worked. I mean I've done a lot of films and you know, things, you try and that section works or this one doesn't really... but I remember there's a moment I remember reading in the script and then I saw it on the screen, there's a moment where a plastic bag...

DL: Right

AB: is going like that in the wind. And when I saw it in the film I thought, 'Oh my god, he did it. He figured out how to make that work.' And you know in reality when they shot it, it was just a plastic bag and a guy off camera with a wind blower, you know?

[Laughter]

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But it was the moment, it was the tone, it was the music, it's where it lands. And um, so I do remember that enormous... I was incredibly moved and incredibly... just the feeling of like, ah, you try so hard and so often it doesn't quite come together, and I thought, that's a great film. I loved it.

DL: And I wonder if with your own performances whether you have a similar feeling. Because yes obviously a plastic bag floats past the camera, you don't quite know what it represents...

AB: I'm pretty critical of myself. I enjoy myself sometimes, I also have that. I look at it and I think 'that's good.' And I think 'ah, alright,' and then a lot of the time I'm very critical, especially at first. I try not to talk about it because I find it very kind of, I don't know, whatever. But I think a lot of people feel that way about watching their own work, and not just actors, but lots of creative people whether they're singers or writers or painters or whatever. You think, 'Oh I could've done it a little bit differently,' or.... At first, especially, and then as time goes by it's easier to watch. And as I said sometimes I quite enjoy it, but I am very critical. It's weird, especially at first it was very hard for me because I'd acted quite a bit before I'd ever seen myself act, and I thought, 'oh my God, that's what my face looks like when I do this or that, oh I never realised that that's what I look like or whatever.' You know, it's like when you first hear your own voice recorded and you think, 'Is that how I sound?' It's like that only bigger.

DL: Well I was wondering do you think it's a healthy thing for actors to see their own performances? Because on one level I suppose the logic is how else do you learn, do you improve things, but on another level, it's always that thing of thinking well what if you see something you really like and you do more of that.

AB: I hadn't thought about that.

DL: And that's the way to a good performance.

AB: I think you do learn, I have learned from it. And I know some people who never, ever, ever watch themselves, and I... I've learned too much watching myself, I learn a lot watching myself, and in some ways I learned there were things I was worrying about that I didn't need to worry about. I learn all kinds of things, so no I do

watch myself and for that reason. I don't watch myself on set.

DL: Right.

AB: And actually there's less and less of that now anyway, because it takes too much time, but yeah I do for learning purposes.

DL: I'm just wondering, this must be quite a strange experience in that case, just sitting and watching yourself over and over again and then having to talk about it afterwards. It's slightly peculiar.

AB: Yes.

DL: I feel like I should apologise. Is that appropriate?

AB: Yes, you should.

DL: I'm sorry, I can only say sorry.

[Laughter]

AB: That's alright, I forgive you.

DL: Let's look at another clip in that case. You mentioned 20th Century Women.

AB: No, it's also a big ego trip, so come on.

DL: Is it? Is it?

AB: Yeah, in fact it's a bit strange in that way, especially in this room.

[Laughter]

There's a picture of Albert Einstein and George Bernard Shaw in the other room, and I found that slightly intimidating.

DL: There's Marilyn Monroe as well.

AB: They're together in the same picture. And there's Marilyn Monroe and Liza Minnelli and never mind.

DL: And now you, now you. 20th Century Women. I mean the reason I wanted to talk about it, apart from the fact it's just a fantastic movie, is the character you play, Dorothea, I'm wondering whether... She's this incredible mix of kind of levity and gravity. She's lived a lot of life and she's still got life to live. I wonder whether you feel more attached to certain characters in

your body of work than others, and I wonder whether Dorothea was one of them, where you read the script and thought, 'You know what, I actually like this woman?'

AB: I love them all. That's the joy of it, is that you don't have to judge people when you're playing them, you love them. And you're their advocate. And that's a fabulous feeling, you know, fighting for somebody like that. You're their advocate. And you don't have to be, it doesn't have to be, yeah you don't have to judge them. So, Dorothea... Mike Mills wrote and directed it, and it's all Mike Mills. He's this sort of mad genius. He's not mad at all; he's very sane, very grounded. But he was consumed with this story. And he was considering a number of actresses. I've not yet asked him who else, but I'll get him one day. I have a feeling I might know. Anyway, he sent me the script and said 'would you please read this, and then if you like it please meet with me.' So I read it. It blew my mind because I'm from California, I grew up in Southern California at that time, so I just started thinking about... I had so many of my own personal associations. And I just loved the material. So I was like fine, great, I'll meet him. So we met and he, it was great it we just talked, and he asked me to do the part and he's so imaginative and the way he approached it... I've never worked on a movie the way we worked on it. And I really loved it. And the other people I learned so much from. Greta Gerwig, who's now made her own movie, who's incredible and smart and just a fine actress. And Billy Crudup, and the boy who played my son and Elle Fanning. And we all bonded and we went on trips together and we improvised, we danced together. We would dance, we had dance parties, I mean it's like the thing you think would never happen that they sort of pretend would happen in acting school. But actually it happened once. So there we were, we were dancing and we were improvising and you know, he would have certain... He gave them all books to read. I don't remember.... We talked endlessly because I was playing his mother, and who doesn't want to talk about their mother?

DL: It's very true.

AB: We still talk about his mother and we already made the movie! So yeah, or some version of his mother. So it was really, I loved her. I did love her, and what the writing... there was a lot of great writing. We ended up improvising a lot. I think we figured out about twenty-five percent

of the movie we improvised. He would have us improvise, he would have us do it with no dialogue, he would have us do it, I don't know, in all kinds of different ways. It was really a joy. And very hard. I mean all of this is so hard, all of these films. Talking about them in retrospect it's like, 'Oh let's have a chat' and it's all kind of funny but in the moment it's just, you know, you don't know. It's like you're on a journey but you're just kind of looking. And you're always in that state of, 'Which way?' and, 'Did we just get that? I don't know, we have to move on' and 'oh I hope that was right, I think that was right, but we've got the next thing to do.' You know, you're in this state of, it's a good feeling, but it's a very uncertain feeling you have to learn to live with because it's imperative. Especially if you want to try to find something in front of the camera that's unexpected. Because it's easy to plan. That's great. If we could just plan everything then we could all make great movies all the time. But it's what you don't plan, and especially with the camera, that's what it wants to see, and that's the thing that nobody's ever discussed and nobody's ever thought 'hey it would be great if you....' You just, something will happen. And once in a while something does happen and when that happens then it's really exciting. Um, and yeah, so it's that whole preparing for the unexpected and all of that. But we did a lot of preparation.

DL: Ok. I have another question about Mike Mills' mother.

AB: Ok.

DL: But I think maybe we'll look at a clip from 20th Century Women first, then pick it up.

AB: Ok.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

DL: That's such a great scene. What I read was that actually while you were building up the character you watched the favourite films of Mike Mills' mother. Is that true? And I wondered because films can be such a clue to someone's soul. So was that part of the process, or what that the press getting that wrong?

AB: Um, I remember I watched Stage Door because, yes, oh and Humphrey Bogart. He wanted me to watch Humphrey Bogart movies.

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DL: Ok. I wanted to ask about your performance there with Elle Fanning, as well. Because we talked about you and older actresses at the start of your screen career, and I wondered when you're working with someone like Elle Fanning—who I think you've worked with twice?

AB: Yes.

DL: On *Ginger & Rosa* as well. Are you, what kind of relationship are you having with her I suppose on and off camera. Do you feel like you want to mentor a younger actress, I suppose both as a performer and as someone making their way in this industry?

AB: Um, I tend to mother everybody. And Elle is an extraordinary girl, a lovely, lovely person. She's so much fun. She has a great sense of humour. I adore her, and she has a wonderful family she doesn't need anybody mothering her. And the young actors like Elle and Lucas who played my son, they're particularly great to watch because they're just doing it. Elle probably less so because she's made a lot of films and she probably has a lot more skill, but the great ones when they're kids are the best because they're just doing what they are doing intuitively. And um, that's the thing we're trying to find again, right? I learned that years ago, that they're the ones to watch really carefully and how they do what they do. They know how to just do enough, so, um... And Elle is such a great girl, and I think she's just going to go on and continue to make... She has very good taste. And now she's worked with so many people. She's done a lot of movies. I was kind of worried about her when I first met her, not worried that there was anything wrong, but I just wanted her to have a normal life. And I wanted her to have a taste of going to high school and being around other kids and that kind of thing. So, I sort of did pull her aside and her grandmother, and said, 'Please let her go to school,' because she could have just gone from film to film, but she did. She did go to school and she just graduated now, she just turned eighteen, or it was a while ago. And she, you know she's like, 'I can just do what I want, I can go to the set, I don't have to have my mother or a minder with me.' It was, you know, she was.... And also, you know all the kids are doing two things because they have to do schoolwork and work, so they're always doing twice as much work as the rest of us are. And so she's like, 'I don't have to do schoolwork anymore!' She's extraordinary; she's a great girl.

DL: I've monopolised the conversation, which I didn't intend to, and I will hand it over. I just wanted to talk quite quickly about your new movie *Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool*. You mentioned Gloria Grahame once already; you're playing Gloria Grahame. So I just wanted to ask about the challenge of that, which seems a daunting challenge. You know, Gloria Grahame, this incredible bombshell, was she someone whose films you were already familiar with, whose iconography you were already besotted with?

AB: Well I had watched her because Stephen had suggested, Stephen Frears had suggested that I watch her. So I was somewhat familiar with her, I'd seen some of her movies. But now, because I was working on this film, even though I'm playing her at my age, I wanted to see all of the films. And it's truly thrilling to watch all the films, I highly recommend *Sudden Fear*, which is one that I hadn't watched, with Joan Crawford. It's such a great movie. And Joan Crawford is wow. She out-Joan Crawfords Joan Crawford. And it's such a great plot. And there's simplicity to it, and I think she had produced it herself. She—Joan Crawford—she... it starts in a theatre in New York City, and she's this very glamorous playwright, Joan Crawford, and there are actors up on the stage and she's saying to the producer and the director, 'Fire him, fire that one, I don't like him.' And they say, 'Well we can't do that,' and she says, 'I have that right, I'm the playwright, fire him.' So they fire Jack Palance and then they open the play. It's a huge success; she gets on the train to go back to California. Half way there she notices Jack Palance, he's in the train station, he's right there, oh my God, what's he doing there? He gets on the train with her and starts to play cards and then suddenly they're madly in love and they have this mad affair and then they arrive in San Francisco and she's crazy about him and it's not until then you find out he's in fact a swindler, and his partner is Gloria Grahame. It's so great. And then they plot to kill her to take her money. It's so wonderful, and actually it's that film where Gloria and Joan Crawford both have this white scarf and one ends up dressing up like the other, one in the fur coat, and there are echoes of that in *The Grifters* that Stephen Frears did. Yeah, so anyway, *In a Lonely Place* is one of my favourites or Gloria's. And then she did *Oklahoma*, of course, that was probably her last, biggest movie. She really had a hard time after that; she couldn't get work, she had a very scandalous personal life, maybe that had

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something to do with it and she then, it was really tough. She made a few television shows, a very bad horror movie in the seventies, and that's why she ended up in England doing plays. She was in Watford, she was in Sheffield at those theatres, and they would play *I'm Just a Girl Who Can't Say No* in the movie theatre, I mean in the theatre, theatre, as the curtain would come down for *The Glass Menagerie* or *Rain*. She also did *Rain*, which, really when you think about it she was doing *Rain* and she was in her fifties. It was... I mean it's a wonderful short story, great, great short story. I read the short story, the play is kind of corny, but...

DL: And it's another astonishing performance. Let's have a look at a clip from *Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool*.

AB: Oh, thank you.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

DL: We've got time for just a couple of questions, so if you do have a question for Annette, raise your hand in this really rather splendid and bizarre room. Yes, just over here in the front. You may just have to project, unless a microphone presents itself.

Q: Annette, thank you so much for your time tonight. I loved watching *The American President*, I like that the climactic speech Michael Douglas makes. My question is about your script selections, when you're trying to select your scripts. Are there particular bugbears you find with, specifically scripts that... Do people make the same mistakes with the work they submit, or are there.... What sort of criteria do you have for selecting the right script for the next project that you do?

AB: Thank you for your question. Well I have a family, I have four kids. They're bigger—they've grown now, so now that's changing because they're flying out into the world. I only have my youngest is at home who's in high school. But a lot of it has been for many many years: When is this shooting and where is this shooting? And I mean that quite honestly. So there's that, but that's changing a little bit. And I've been able to make things work in terms of time if I really love something. So it's, I think it's just a very straightforward simple process, it's: Does it get you? Are you moved by it? Is the narrative strong? Because I know that no matter what I do

as an actress, if that's not there, I can't make it work. That I've learned. Sometimes I can see a problem and I know what might help. Very often I see there's a problem and I don't quite know what it is and I can't really solve it. It's also, of course, it's the director, because it's the director's medium. It's not the actor's medium, that's the theatre and you're giving it to them. The process, they determine the process, how you're going to put it, the process of how you're going to put it together. I try to be very much flexible in that way. And I know when I started, again, I mean I'd done a lot of plays, but I didn't know how does this work in the movies. Milos Forman rehearsed endlessly. And then I went to do a picture with someone else—Robert De Niro, I did a picture with him and he didn't want to rehearse at all. We had to do a read through and it was very unpleasant for him he didn't like doing that, and he didn't want to rehearse at all. So I figure well he's Robert De Niro, he knows what he's doing. So then I would sort of watch, well how do I feel? Do I like to rehearse? And what I've come down to is it's wonderful to be able to sit and talk and have a conversation beforehand, even if... and it is helpful to read through, not that you're trying to do it like you're going to do it, but just to say the words, to get them out. But the narrative itself, I want to be moved or amused. Laugh or whatever, you understand what I mean. It's not that I have to sob every time I read a script, but if it preoccupies me, then that's a very good sign. I can't quite get it out of my head, I find myself thinking about it, I find myself going back into it and thinking about it more. And I'm always looking for something different. But I'm very lucky. I'm very lucky and I've been very lucky to do the ones that I've done. And part of it, when I started, was just luck because there were other movies that weren't very good that I would've done, I just didn't get them. And then I happened to get a few that were with more prestigious people, so a lot of it was just luck. But I read a lot, and I read a lot of material, and so there's no sense to it. Just if there's something that really grabs you. Yeah. Does that make sense? I don't know if that's any help, but yeah.

DL: We've got time for one more question, I think. Yes, just here.

AB: I can't really see you.

Q: Thank you for a lovely evening. Thank you. I've admired your work for many, many years.

AB: Thanks.

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Q: My question starts as being an observation, finished with a question. One of the things I love about the work you do, Annette, is your face actually moves. When you're on stage, or when you're on film, your face moves and we see you. And I am heartily sick of seeing so many films with women your age and my age, where their faces don't move. And I just want to ask what can you do, what can anybody do to celebrate women being the age we are?

[Applause]

DL: That's a very good last question.

[Laughter]

AB: Well thank you, that's a great compliment. Um, yeah, I don't know what to say about all of that. I don't know. I notice the same thing. And it's just a part of the modern world, isn't it. It's part of the medical advances and scientific advances.

[Laughter]

You know, and it's not just people my age or our age, it's also very young people are doing that as well. I don't know, it'll be very interesting to see what the long-term ramifications of that are. I kind of think there's room for everyone. And I don't really, many of my dear friends have had lots of plastic surgery, and for them it makes sense and I understand that, and it's not that I'm not vain, and it's not that I don't, that I just celebrate every wrinkle.

[Laughter]

You know I have the same vanity as anybody else. But I don't know, when I became an actress a lot of the people that I admired were much older. And also in my family, my dad is ninety-one, my mum is eighty-eight. They've been married sixty-seven years. I had a grandfather that lived to be 100. There's a lot of longevity in my family I'm very lucky. And I've always been interested in that. I've always been interested in what happens as one gets older, and I've always had a sort of aspiration to reflect the age that I'm in. And that, just because, I think that this is what I want when I go to see things. I want to be pulled into it. And I am. I love going to things. In fact, I saw a play in New York right before I came here I stopped in New York and I saw a play. And Brenda Wehle who is one of the actresses in the American

Beauty clip, you know the two ladies that are by the pool, and there's one lady with this long frizzy hair. Her name is Brenda Wehle the actress; she's a great actress. And she's in a play right now in New York called *Mary Jane*, which is so beautifully done. And I felt just, this play, it's at the New York Theatre Workshop, it just washed over me. I was so swept away, and I love that feeling. I love that feeling and I love that feeling in the movies as well. And the movies are so powerful. I was just in Venice at the Venice Film Festival on the jury and I saw twenty-one films in nine days. That's a lot of movies! But it was so inspiring. Just to see what people from all over the globe are thinking about, what they're preoccupied with. And the fact that there's a lot of bad, you know there's a lot of horrible things going on in the world right now, right? We know that, that's always the case. In so many ways there's so much pain, there's so much suffering, right? But there are all these people, nonetheless, trying to make something. To show something that's happening. And when you see this plethora of films, when you see an international group of films, then you really think, 'my God, the power that cinema has is incredible.' So for me, I just want to be an instrument in that part of the storytelling. So I figure I just want to be the age that I am. I just did a movie—Vanessa Redgrave is in *Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool*, she plays my mother, she has one scene with Frances Barber. She was doing *Richard III* here in London at the time, so she came on her day off and did a twelve-hour day and I was, I mean it was one of those moments. I thought, 'I can't believe I am standing here acting in a scene with Vanessa Redgrave.' That just, like, blew my mind.

Audience member: It's a great scene, as well.

AB: Thank you. She was great, right? So there's Vanessa doing what she's doing, and then I made a movie with her, I just finished an entire film that we did together that's just over. So, you know there are people like her; there are a number of them, heroes of mine. So that's kind of where I'm headed. But you know if I had to stop for some reason I'd probably drive my husband crazy, and my kids, I'd probably become very neurotic. I don't know what I'd... but um, I'm sort of joking, but part of me thinks, well, I've been very lucky and have got to do a lot. So I'd like to continue doing it, working with interesting people. And you know, I don't know how a lot of you older folks like me feel, but getting older is sort of freeing in a way. It's quite freeing. Especially maybe more so for women, I

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don't know, because it's like oh you've pleased enough people, you don't have to do that anymore, thank God. Ok that's done!

[Laughter]

And I've always been pretty much a conciliatory person in a working atmosphere and I still am, but I also know more now. So if I see something or if I have an idea about something, I'm very diplomatic. In the past I might have noticed something and thought, 'Well I really shouldn't say anything I'm just the actress I'll just sit over here and be quiet. That's kind of a problem there, but I'll just...' Now I'll say, 'Excuse me, can I just... I think there's a problem. That might be, I don't know, maybe we should look at that.' Because this happens all the time in film. You're filmmakers, you know, there's part of you that just wants to get the day done. And it's like when someone says, 'that moustache looks bad,' it's fine, you know, it's fine, ok? Please, we need to get the shot, we need to get on. And then you make the movie and there's this fucking moustache and it wrecks the scene. And you think, 'Why didn't someone say something?!'

[Laughter]

That happens all the time. And so sometimes the people that are being the squeaky wheel, we need them, because they're the ones saying, you know, 'This isn't really working, ok? I'm sorry, this scene, can I be honest?' You know I might just do that, I might just say, 'I feel really phoney. I haven't found it yet.' So in the past I might not have quite put it so bluntly, but now I might just say that. I have to figure this out, I know it's my job to figure it out, but I can't just pretend that this is working. 'This doesn't feel truthful to me,' or whatever. So there's a lot of good things about it, but that's my way of saying... thank you!

[Applause]

DL: We will have to leave it there. Please, with thanks to Audi, thank you to the one-and-only Annette Bening.

AB: Thank you, thanks for coming. Thank you, thank you. Thank you very much that was fun.

DL: An absolute pleasure, absolute pleasure.

[Applause]