

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Sir David Hare

9 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

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**David Hare:** I had a friend who was a focus puller. Those of you who work in film, as many people here do, know that focus puller, operator, DoP is a career structure, and he'd been a focus puller for a long time. Then he got his first job as an operator and was very excited – this was in the 1980s – and he rang me ten days after the shoot began and said to me, 'I've walked off the film'. I said, 'Why did you walk off?' and he said, 'Because at the first day's rushes on the Tuesday the director said, 'Oh my god, that wasn't what I was expecting at all.' On the second day, the director said, 'Oh my god, I didn't realise it was going to look like this.' On the third day, he said, 'Oh, I'm so disappointed. This wasn't what I wanted at all.' After a week of this, my friend walked off the movie and said to the director, 'Plainly, I'm not giving you what you want.'

I said the person who should have walked off that movie was the director because if you ask me, to define what a film director does, what the job is of director, it is to know what the rushes are going to look like. That is the job. A director who doesn't know what the rushes are going to look like isn't a very good director.

Everything I am going to say about screenwriting is based on what I believe film to be. When you haven't yet made the film and you're all planning the film then 150 people have an idea of what the film is going to be and they all think they are seeing the same thing. But they are not seeing the same thing; they are seeing something subtly different because the only place they are seeing it is inside their cerebral cortex; it's abstract, it doesn't exist.

The film director is the only one who can make the abstract concrete. If I say I'm going to make a film of *Treasure Island* we will all think we are going to see the same thing but somebody will actually be thinking 'Oh, this is going to be great, it's going to be like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, we'll get Johnny Depp and he'll camp around and we'll do it like that.' Somebody else will say 'Oh, we're really going to reconstruct the 19th century and make it completely authentic and we'll travel out in boats that are perfect reproductions of exactly how boats were in the 19th century.' Somebody else will say, 'Oh, I imagine it's going to bring out the politics of Stevenson's novel which is so little understood,' and everybody will think that they

see the same thing. But they don't. They see something completely different.

The first time I realised this was when I was on a film I was actually directing and something happened which I thought was a one-off but I've noticed it's happened on nearly every film I've worked on.

I was making a film called *Wetherby* with Vanessa Redgrave playing the lead character, and she was playing a lonely schoolteacher in Yorkshire. It was the moment at which the principal character in the film is shown the place in which they live. And when we had gone to immense expense to build a whole house in the middle of a field, Vanessa walked into that room and said, "Oh, my god, this is not what I thought it was going to look like at all. I had a completely different idea of how my character lived, where she lived, what she had on the walls, what the layout of the house was." I said, 'Vanessa, I've had endless meetings with you where I've explained to you, I've shown you the room, I have shown you the photographs; the designer has been assiduous about doing all this. Surely you knew what it was going to look like?' 'Oh, no, in my head it's completely different,' she said. 'It's not like that at all.'

On *The Hours*, when Meryl Streep walked into the room in which she, the principal character lived, we had to stop filming for six hours to completely re-dress the apartment. Stephen Daldry is the most assiduously collegiate of directors. He'd had endless meetings with her about what it was going to look like but at that moment when the abstract becomes concrete everybody realises that they are making a subtly different film in their heads. And the job of the director is to align everyone's views and to make everybody understand the degree to which they are making the same thing.

The screenwriter's job is to begin that process. To be the first person who does that. I am the first person who imagines what it will be like at the Everyman Hampstead in 18 months time or two years time when the idea becomes concrete. So when people ask what I do for a living, mostly I think. I spend most of the day thinking – a posh word for thinking is imagining – but I do whatever you call that. Dreaming what the film is going to be. That's what I do most of the day. Most of the

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day I balance out the implications of one thing being one thing, another thing being another thing, and how that will work.

When I recently delivered the film I'm hoping to make next year, the person who paid for it said to me 'Oh my goodness me, this is dialogue to die for.' I didn't like to say to her I usually write the dialogue at about 4.30 in the afternoon and it usually takes me about 20 minutes. Actually, writing the dialogue is kind of the easiest thing that a screenwriter does because if you've thought it all out right then the actual job of writing the words is just incredibly easy, because most of what you're doing is imagining.

Once you've done the imagining of 'how is this film going to work?' then nine-tenths of the job is lawyering, really – meaning: advocating your view of the film. You have an idea of the film, you present that idea of the film to the director and the producer, it happens to be in the form of words. It's down on the page but inevitably it comes to them as a disappointment.

It is particularly true of adaptations but it is also true of original screenplays. 'Oh, when you said you were going to make a film about Shackleton I didn't think it was going to be like this at all... Oh, I thought a Shackleton film was going to be much more like this...' However, the film I'm writing in their minds is a contemporary thriller – 'Oh I didn't think it was going to be like this.'

Whatever it is, there is a terrible moment at which a film of which they have dreamed of as being everything suddenly becomes something. And actually you've put a lot more thought into it than they have because all they've got is these little images playing on the wall in the back of their minds and they haven't actually worked out how those images fit together. They've simply said it's going to be a bit like this, a bit like that... That's their dream of it. You're the person who's had to sit down and work out how the dream connects, so the first moment is always a moment of disappointment.

Then, as everybody knows, whatever profession you work in, you can say it's just a sort of rule of human behaviour, that if you have a meeting to decide on something communally you all walk into a room to decide on something communally

– be that in business, be that in politics, be it in the law or any field at all – only the idiot speaks first.

As Lenin famously said, 'It doesn't matter what is said at the meeting, all that matters is who is there at the end of the meeting.' Well, the person who is always there at the end of the meeting is the director, and the person who speaks last in the room is the director because they are the person who is going to make the abstract concrete. So you are the poor idiot who puts up the vision of the film in order for everybody else to test it against what their own vision is going to be.

I would say, particularly on something that involves a lot of money – and the last two films I've made have involved a lot of money – you do spend ten times as much time advocating your point of view as you do actually writing. Of course, the process may be incredibly rich the moment at which you realise someone else has a vision that enriches yours. That's, of course, very rich and collaborative, but you are basically the fall guy and that is the role of the screenwriter because you are the first person who's putting up a view of the film.

This became very clear to me when I met Robert Altman at a party in somebody's back garden and Altman, with a very satirical look, said to me 'Oh, you write screenplays, don't you?' and I said 'Yes' and he said 'Do you know what I do with the screenplay on the first day of shooting?' and I said, 'No, what do you do?' He said 'I tear it up.' He then rang me about two weeks later and said, 'Hi, it's Bob Altman here. I wondered if you could write a film for me.' I said 'I'd love to write a film for you but, you know, you did tell me the first thing you do with a screenplay is tear it up. And he said immediately, like a lounge lizard: 'But if you had written it I wouldn't tear it up.' But I didn't believe that for a moment.

But I did know what he meant, which is – the screenplay is only the means by which he was able to do his own thinking. In other words, there was a process of thinking and you had done your stage of the thinking, or imagining, and it had got him to a certain point and it was the thing that had got him on to the take-off platform from which he took off and then like a rocket he literally dropped away the thing that had got him into the air, which was the script. But once he was

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up in the air he didn't need the script at all because he was on his way. I didn't disrespect him for it, but it is also true I didn't take the job.

Everything I've got to say is based on that analysis of what film is, of what you might call a collective delusion, which has to be whipped into order and has to be aligned. That's really how I see it. And everything I've got to say about How to Write a Screenplay is based on that. I would never give a lecture on How to Write A Play. I am giving a lecture on How to Write a Screenplay out of profound insecurity. I believe, rightly or wrongly, in my heart that I know how to write a play; I don't believe I know how to write a screenplay, and I don't think anyone knows how to write a screenplay, indeed I don't think many people know how to make a film.

Film is the most uneven of arts. Whichever director or writer you claim you admire, I can point to an absolute dog they have made and you will say, 'I cannot believe that my great hero – be it Renoir, be it Steven Spielberg, be it whoever – made a film as bad as that.' We all make very bad films and the reason we all make very bad films is because of this particular nature of the form. It is the most uneven art form.

And so that is why I want to give a lecture because I keep a sort of running order about what I believe about how to write a screenplay. I love many stories about Cary Grant, especially the one where he gave all his lovers a green cardigan to tell them the affair was over so that anyone in LA who met anyone else wearing a green cardigan knew they were members of a very distinguished club – but he also did an incredible thing which was, when things went wrong on a movie of which he disapproved he did not make a fuss at the time; he simply noted it down in a notebook and then he had it added to his contract. So if he was kept waiting for too long before a shot: 'I must never be kept more than 30 mins.' If he went after 9pm, 'I must never go after 9pm.' Eventually, the addendums to his contract became so long; the contract was four pages and the addenda were pages and pages. And that's really my view about How to Write A Screenplay – this is the stuff I have painfully learnt from the experience. But it's only what I believe today and probably next time I've written a film I'll believe something completely different.

I started going to the cinema seriously when I was 13 or 14. I lived on the south coast of England and I used to come up to town and meet my friend Nigel Andrews and in those days you could go to the London Pavilion at 9.55am and see a film at 10 o'clock, a film at lunchtime, a film at teatime and then I'd get a train back to Bexhill. That was a really satisfying day. I'd see three films in a day.

Nigel's favourite film was *The Pit And The Pendulum* with Vincent Price, and he showed an early love for old rubbish which has stood him in very good stead for 35 years as film critic of the *Financial Times*. But we both noticed very early on that films have a familiar pattern. And it's the first thing you notice about films and you actually sort of forget it when you work in the industry yourself.

The rule of most films if they're 90 minutes long, which they used to be in those days, is that for the first 30 minutes you are having a completely wonderful time and going 'Oh this is absolutely marvellous' and for the next half hour you're going 'Well, this is still quite good, I'm still quite enjoying it' and for the last 30 minutes you're saying 'For god's sake, get me out of here, I'm going insane with boredom.' Most films degenerate, that's the pattern; they start out with vitality and then as they proceed... the idea is exhausted. That, I'm afraid, is what we call the pattern of cinema going.

It's only the great films that move towards the end so the incredibly simple rule of writing a screenplay is always to end-load it, always to write something where the outcome is more important than the proposition. All Hollywood is interested in is propositions. George Clooney is a CIA agent who also happens to excel at the game of golf. Can he win the US Open without revealing the fact that he is a spy for America? Wow. What a fantastic idea for a film isn't that great? That's the proposition, but if you're the poor idiot who has to work out the proposition then it is literally like a mathematical equation. There are only so many ways that story can work out. And you can see them sort of coming a mile off.  $A + B = C$ . 'Oh my god I've got to write C.' Sandra Bullock is a nun whose distant relative has left her \$100m on the condition she leaves the convent and marries a Muslim. Again, oh what a fantastic idea; a great part for Sandra Bullock.

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You can see the meeting where everyone says – and they use that word 'hook', this is a fantastic hook for a film – 'What a great hook.' Nobody at the meeting says 'How's it going to end?' because it's so boring to think about how it's going to end. There is a reason why Hollywood uses the word 'formula'. It's nothing to do with ingredients; it's to do with mathematics. Formula means there is only one certain way of this story working out and you can see a mile off the way it's going to work itself out. So I avoid and never accept any movie that is a proposition. I am only interested in what I call 'outcome movies'.

On *The Hours*, which took three years to make, we were in an immense amount of trouble for reasons that are now lost in the historic past to me – I don't think I could even recount what the reasons were – but I never for one moment panicked. A lot of people were panicking around me and had very good reason to panic and I was going: 'There is no reason ever to panic on this film because the outcome of the movie is so profoundly satisfying.' Three stories co-exist from different generations and then the three are thrown up in the air together and then at the end one character from one story will meet another character from another story and both of them will have been profoundly influenced by the third story and the meeting will have an effect on both their lives. I said 'It just can't go wrong. You may think you're in trouble but we absolutely know where we are heading.' And if in a movie you know where you're heading and you know that place is good, you can't get into trouble.

On *The Reader*, [the character] Michael Berg had, in the book, written a book in order to talk in public about the fact he's unknowingly had an affair with a Nazi war criminal. Plainly in the book, the convention of first person narrative [means] you will accept the fact it is Michael Berg who is the narrator and is therefore telling the story. There is no such convention in the cinema unless you do a first person film with a lot of dreary voiceover which I didn't want to do. So I had to invent the idea that he would tell somebody. In other words, the same gesture that's in the book – which is he tells the world by publishing a book – I decided he would tell his daughter. When I said I'd got this idea of how to end it, everybody said: 'Oh no, nobody knows how to end this film.' I said I've got this idea of how to end it, he'll tell his daughter at

the end of the picture. Everybody said that's a really terrible idea and I said 'You wait, you just wait.' And again, for two years we went on and I always knew we were fine and never felt in trouble because I always felt the end is going to be great. The end is basically what people remember about a film, and so you are wise in my view to do what are called 'outcome movies' and not 'proposition movies.'

I won't call these things rules; I'll call them beliefs. And the second of these beliefs I am going to illustrate with a clip from a movie. I thought it would be more fun in a *University Challenge* sort of way not to identify the movie so there'll be that moment where all the smart people whisper to each other what this movie is. It's a long clip, I warn you, and it's from a movie that I admire extravagantly. It illustrates the second of my rules which I call 'Who is the third who always walks beside you?' This is a clip from a great writer.

(Clip from *The Fallen Idol* (1948) in which Baines and Julie try to have a discussion about their affair in front of a child, Phillippe)

The film is *The Fallen Idol* and it's by Graham Greene and directed by Carol Reed around the same time as *The Third Man*, the most glorious time of British filmmaking, and I called it 'Who is the third who always walks beside you?'

I could also show you the scene from *Brief Encounter* [with] exactly the same strategy: Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson meet and every time they try to have a conversation about their love affair, Joyce Cary and Stanley Holloway provide the working class entertainment in the background and say things like 'I'm sure I don't know to what you're referring' and 'These rock buns...' It's exactly the same principle; if someone wants to write a thesis on tea shops in British love stories they can do it because there it is. The complicator is that there is a third person, and what is extraordinary in Greene's writing I so admire is that, faced with the prospect of just writing a love scene, instead he writes it through the presence of the third person and it's the complicating factor which means that it begins to feel like life.

Now when you begin to talk about these things, people and so-called screenwriting techniques

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---

which are taught at technical classes, the idea is meant to be that somehow there are tricks and you work these tricks in order to make your screenplay more interesting than it would be if you just laid out the story. But, on the contrary, 'Who is the third who always walks beside you?' is what makes you begin to feel that something is real.

In real life, if you've been longing to take a girl out for six months and finally pluck up the courage to ask her and the date is arranged, what always happens is that just as you're leaving the apartment the phone goes and you're told that your grandmother has just died. So while you are conducting one conversation in one way with the girl you have so looked forward to going out with, your mind is actually on something else.

As human beings we are not conducting just one narrative but many, many narratives at the same time. The more that the screenwriter can begin to make many narratives happen at once so that what's going on is not just one story but the many stories, so that each scene is charged with what has been going on in other scenes, then the screenplay begins to come to life.

As we all know, everybody talks about how love scenes in movies are incredibly boring, particularly scenes that involve people naked on a bed. Meanwhile, underneath two people on a bed the water is rising because the ship is sinking and they are unaware. Just at the most simple level your film is beginning to function because something is happening which reminds us of what life is like. Life isn't concentrated on one thing at one time. So I avoid what are called 'bell jar scenes' in my mind, scenes which are only about themselves. They are the most incredibly boring scenes in all movies, where the subject of the scene, the sole subject of discussion, the sole subject of illustration is simply the scene itself and the themes of the scene. Unless something is going on in the scene which has been lent to the scene by what's happened before and which predicts what may happen after, the scene is just going to lie there like a dead slab.

[SPOILER WARNING] Yesterday in *The Guardian* I wrote about *Mad Men* and I wrote about a scene I particularly admire because it takes three series for the writers of *Mad Men* to finally get Betty –

who is the wife of Don Draper – to confront him with the fact that he is a fake and that he's faked his identity. But what they do that is so absolutely brilliant is the most perfect illustration of the rule 'Who is the third who always walks beside you?'

(Clip from *Mad Men* in which Betty asks Don to open a locked drawer in his desk.)

I have to say it's a very confident screenwriter who risks the line 'You know I know what's in there' and gets away with it. What I love so much [is that] you've been waiting for that scene for three series and when the scene comes there is another woman in the car outside. Certainly when I first saw that scene; all my mind was about, 'Oh my god that woman in the car outside is going to come bursting through the door' and it puts the whole scene at a level of tension that wouldn't exist. It is also telling you something about the man. It's telling you that he is completely confident he can keep every ball juggling in the air. The fact he's got a woman outside in the car doesn't seem to bother him, he just carries on; it's wonderfully eloquent about his character and who he is. You've got an extra layer of anxiety. [SPOILER ENDS]

That is the work of screenwriting. It is providing those extra layers that charge scenes.

The reason that method acting was invented was because of bad writing. It exists to cover up bad writing because what actors are doing who believe in the method are effectively saying, 'I need to charge this scene with more than is apparently there on the page.' And that was because they were given scripts with very little on the page and so they invented a method where they said, 'Let me bring into this scene the outside world. Let me bring into the scene the history of my character. Let me try and make this material do more than it appears to be doing.'

All they did by following this was produce that extraordinary sense of strain with which we now associate modern method acting, but at the time I am absolutely convinced it was there to do what the screenwriter ought to have been doing, which is putting those layers in for the actors. The actors sensed the layers weren't there and because the layers so often weren't there, they tried to

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produce them from inside themselves to compensate for the badness of the writing.

I am going to go on to the next law or rule or belief, and that is basically... Well, I am going to show the most famous clip from the most famous film of all time, and it lasts about 12 seconds so don't blink or you'll miss it.

(Clip from *Citizen Kane* (1941), in which Mr Bernstein recalls an attractive woman he saw many years ago to Mr Thompson.)

This was *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles, the most visually dazzling debut by a filmmaker ever and yet, what do we remember from that film? What's the most famous scene in that film? The most famous scene in that film is a speech, and that is the origin of my belief which is 'Tell, don't show'. All film students are taught 'Show, don't tell' and they're taught that film is a visual medium. Neither thing is true and they are the fundamentals on which film schools operate.

You notice Orson Welles – fond of an image – does not feel it necessary to move off Bernstein while he recounts this story and show us a girl in flashback with a parasol, standing on a jetty and moving in slow motion and turning with a vapid look on her face as if she was in a hair commercial. Somehow, Orson Welles trusts that the speech will do what he wants it to do. If you notice, what's extraordinary about it is that it's a ravishing visual image. If you look at the way that image is composed he's got the fire on one side, the rain coming down on the other, and the thunder above, so it's not as if it's visually dead. On the contrary it's an extraordinary image of an old man who is trying to keep himself warm in the rain and by charging the present picture with that he allows the speech to do its work.

If film, as is always said, is dream – and I've been checking these last few nights because I knew I was going to say this – but in my dreams, people talk. I got really told off by someone in a dream the other night and I was profoundly satisfied because I thought this is going to illustrate this point I'm going to make at the NFT on Thursday which is: dreams are not just visual images, they actually consist of words as well. If you think about the most significant moments in your life, a lot of them do involve words.

Say you are in a car crash; a car crash is an event but the thing that most people who have been in car crashes try to do is remember what it is they were saying at the moment before the crash. It becomes incredibly important to them to remember what it was they were expressing. So, language actually has a function in film; to work alongside image.

This idea that you produce a film which is purer by reducing it simply to images is complete nonsense and part of throwing away one of the things you've got which is that human beings express themselves through language, and that language and image interact in a way which is profoundly interesting.

And so again, a tendency of modern cinema is to imagine that everyone can write. The actual business of writing dialogue is regarded as not a craft because it is regarded as not important. In actors, directors and producers' minds the whole thing is kind of a visual storyboard in which people's lips move occasionally and some stuff that the screenwriter has given them has to be said. Only, actors then come along in films and say 'Well, the stuff I've been given that comes out of my mouth doesn't seem very good therefore I think I'll write some of this stuff that comes out of my mouth myself because the dialogue is that unimportant.'

I was asked to rewrite a film... someone rang me and said could I rewrite just a bit of this film, just a bit of this film needs rewriting because it's a comedy and... there's a comic bit halfway through... 'You know, the screenwriter's not very good at comedy' and I said, 'Well, when Tom Cruise does a movie they don't say, 'Oh, in the seventh reel you'll be replaced by Tom Hanks because he's better at comedy... that isn't how it works.' The producer, very smart man, said, 'Yes, but they can see where there's a change from Tom Cruise to Tom Hanks but they can't see where there's a change from this screenwriter to you' And I said, 'But no, they sort of sense it, they do sort of sense when a lot of hands have been in the pudding and it feels different than when one, two or three people collaboratively have been allowed to see the whole thing through together.' So the principle is that what they say is incredibly important.

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The fourth rule – there are five in all – is, I suppose, what I would call 'Make way for more talented people.' This is very hard for a screenwriter because obviously, on an occasion like this, the whole principle is that I am up here to say that screenwriting is incredibly important, but actually screenwriting is partly the technique of letting other people do their work. You're trying to create a script that is open, not closed and you're trying to allow other people to bring something to the party. It's not just your party.

I did, and I think it says in the programme, 23 drafts of *The Corrections* which is Jonathan Franzen's novel and it's never been made. I worked on it for probably four or five years and finally, the reason it has never been made was said to me by an incredibly successful director with whom I worked on it for a year. At the end of a year he said to me, 'You know, David, there is absolutely nothing for me to do on this film except shoot it.' He said 'Jonathan Franzen takes up so much room, you take up so much room, there is absolutely nothing for me to do that I can bring to it because you have already brought everything to it,' and so I felt that I had failed. In other words, if I don't excite the actors and directors into wanting to do something which will lift it further than I can have taken it, then, by definition, it's my fault.

This can obviously get us into a long discussion about auteur theory; who makes the film and the difference between the screenwriter and the director which is obviously the question I am always asked, but auteur theory to me is the sort of moral equivalent of bankers giving themselves £20m bonuses. In other words, they don't need that £20m bonus, they don't need auteur theory. Everybody knows the director is the most powerful person on the set. Of course he's the most powerful person on the set because he's the person who's going to make the abstract concrete, so why on earth do you need a theory about it as well? To consecrate your own power, you award yourself a £20m bonus for doing what is finally the most important job. We all accept that but we all expect the director then to start sharing that power out and collaborating, and, crudely, because the directors I have [worked with], Stephen Frears, Louis Malle, Stephen Daldry... are all collaborative in every bone of

their body. They want you to be there, they want you to be part of it. That doesn't mean the film isn't theirs but it means that they accept the power and they understand what to do with it. They don't go around saying 'I'm an auteur.' They really don't.

Auteur theory is particularly bad for film criticism because it makes film criticism lazy. It's so easy to write about films by pretending the director has made them. If you look at the reviews you will see that, by and large, the easiest way of writing a review of anything is to say 'Kieslowski's last film was this...; this film today is like that.' 'It's characteristic of Kieslowski... look at those Kieslowski touches...' Anyone can write that, it takes about two minutes to write a review of a film that puts it in the context of what 'the director's world view' is. But actually take a film and say 'What is *this* film doing? What is *this* film about? What is my reaction to *this* film?' not as a part of some imaginary oeuvre...

How can you imagine *Death In Venice* without Dirk Bogarde? In what sense do you say it's Visconti's *Death In Venice*? Visconti is a director who is intelligent enough to share his power with Dirk Bogarde and allow Dirk Bogarde to do what he wants in *Death In Venice*.

The first thing you have to do as a screenwriter is close the dream down; you have to make it something so that everybody will accept there is some common direction in which everybody is moving, and if they don't accept it you've got to quit the picture. The next stage is opening it out and making it possible for other people to do wonderful things... and I'm going to use Orson Welles again to illustrate what I mean.

(Clip from *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) in which Eugene and Isabelle dance at a party)

To me, it's more or less one of the most thrilling moments in American cinema. That line, which is actually [author] Booth Tarkington's line – I've read the novel – about 'There aren't any old times, old times are dead times, welcome to new times,' is an absolutely thrilling line and yet you can see Welles just goes 'And then if I bring the band up after that line I'm just gonna kill everybody in the house.' It has to be the most exciting swell of music in film. It's an incredible

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---

scene. I haven't got time to show the whole scene which is one of the best directed scenes ever made. But you sense that the script has just been the means by which everybody else has been allowed to bring their contribution and, wow, off he goes on the basis of that line.

What you are seeking to do is inspire which, I don't know if you noticed in *The Fallen Idol*, is exactly the same thing. There is an incredibly moving moment after the boy and the servant leave the tea shop together and that's where Carol Reed brings in that swell of music. He just pulls back and they head towards the door to go out into the world and the scene has been so beautifully written and the tension of the scene has been so great that the director knows exactly where to let the tension go and Greene is allowing that in the way he's written the scene.

So allowing more talented people than yourself to do their work is also an absolutely crucial part of screenwriting.

The last thing I'm going to talk about – this is the last belief – is that you have to be there. This is a very inconvenient thing about screenwriting but the three directors that I named earlier, Fears, Daldry and Malle, who are the three I've most recently worked with, all insist that the writer is present throughout, not just every day on the set but throughout the editing room. To them, it's all one process; in other words, editing is a form of writing. If you work with a good editor it's like working with a writer; they think like writers think and when you're working with them you're just seeing the thing through.

On *The Reader* we lost our producers for tragic reasons, both Sydney Pollack and Anthony Minghella died during the filming. At the end of *The Reader* it was literally me and an editor and Stephen Daldry in a cutting room and we were the last people left standing on the movie. I joined it on Day One and I left it on the last day and that seemed to me a good process for a screenwriter, to see the whole thing through.

It's fantastically inconvenient because most film locations are in studios which are in the suburbs of London. You have to drive out there for the shooting, you have to attend the rehearsal – you are absolutely mad not to attend the rehearsal

because if you go to a rehearsal where, as in *The Hours*, Meryl Streep is acting with Alison Janney and Clare Danes, what sort of idiot would not go and attend that rehearsal and try and improve the scene on the basis of what they are offering you?

Usually by ten in the morning your work is done because you've seen the rehearsal, you know how the day's going to go and you've got to drive back to London and your day's completely ruined and you spend the day saying, 'I've wasted a whole day driving out there.' But you haven't wasted a whole day because you *have* contributed and the actor is usually the person who has brought what is needed to the scene.

In my experience, the idea that actors ask for things for themselves is mostly completely untrue. By and large an actor knows if the scene is missing something, and so the last clip I'm going to show is of a film I made myself called *Licking Hitler* and the scene I'm going to show – I don't say this very often – but this is a scene I'm really, really proud of. I love this scene.

*Licking Hitler* is a film about black propaganda in the second world war. It recreates a wireless unit in Aspley Guise in Buckinghamshire from which the British made fake broadcasts pretending to be two German soldiers talking one to another. They identified particular people back home, women usually, and told them that their husbands were being unfaithful to them in the front, and an incredible amount of work, effort and money was poured by Churchill – orders straight from the top – into this work.

When in 1977 I made this film to show that the Second World War hadn't perhaps been fought in the way that Kenneth More and Richard Todd films implied; I think it was the only influential work that I've ever been involved in. It's the only thing I've ever made that had any influence whatsoever both in the way people saw the war but also... other films started to be made afterwards that started a radical re-examination of the war, and the second world war began to be seen differently.

I had a rehearsal for the climactic scene of the film with Bill Paterson and Kate Nelligan in which Kate finally, as a result of what you'll see, a

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Sir David Hare

9 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

---

previous scene, finally confronts the evil genius of black propaganda about the work that they've been doing. She confronts him and he, a Scotsman who refuses through most of the film to speak about himself at all, finally speaks about his attitude to the work.

We had a rehearsal of this scene and I was incredibly proud of it, thought, oh you know: 'I'm so talented' – I was directing it as well I should say. Then I went back to the hotel and Kate was in the lobby and she said, 'Do you think that scene's finished?' and I said, 'What do you mean?' and she said 'I've just got a feeling that scene isn't finished', and she said, 'Shouldn't my character say something, too?' And I said, 'You're absolutely right' and I got up at four o'clock the next morning and wrote what you're about to see and then by 11am it was shot. It was just a blissful moment, one of those moments in which you feel filmmaking is just the best activity on earth because you're able, out of nowhere, to produce something because somebody has made a brilliant suggestion... and this is the clip that ends the lecture.

(Clip from *Licking Hitler* (1974))

### Q&A

**Q (from the floor):** I know you said you wouldn't talk about writing a play but I just wondered if any of those five rules would also correspond with writing a play for the stage?

**DH:** I should never have called them rules; that was a ridiculous thing to say; *beliefs* – but they'll change.

If I was doing next year's [lecture] I'd have a completely different set of beliefs but it's born of insecurity, it's born of the fact that nobody knows how to do this thing, whereas I'm afraid I do think people know how to write plays and that you do feel the rules of plays are much, much clearer because the process is not the same. You're dealing daily with a sketch of what the thing will become, so for four weeks you are in a room examining something not so dissimilar from what the final thing will be.

On a film you don't get any sense of what the final thing will be; it exists entirely in the director's

mind, so because of that it's a speculative business that involves a huge and exhausting amount of talking – unless you're working with a director who refuses to talk.

**Q (from the floor):** I've got my 1978 copy of the play *Plenty* and I'm just intrigued by the stage direction on the bottom of the first page which must be one of the great stage directions of 20th century drama where Alice takes the penis of a naked body and twiddles it between her thumb and finger. Can you tell me what an earth you were thinking about when you wrote that stage direction?

**DH:** Well, that's certainly the most left-field question. What was I thinking about? Well, I don't want to talk about playwriting but playwriting for me, a visual image is the most important thing. If you say to me, 'What gets me going writing a play?' it's always that feeling that I'm going to sit down in the theatre and see something and the visual image is incredibly important to me.

*Plenty* is a play which, not the film unfortunately, begins with... I had this image of high windows, light, a woman sitting in an old overcoat rolling up a cigarette, and her husband being naked and bloody on the floor in front of her and it just seemed to me like a painting, really. I could imagine Bacon painting that. I could imagine Freud painting that and I knew that if I went to the theatre and saw that I'd rub my hands in anticipation and go, 'This could be a great evening.'

**Q (from the floor):** I'm wondering if you can talk about the collaborative process with the directors you've worked with. Any moments when you've really disagreed with how they've interpreted it?

**DH:** I wrote a film for Michael Winterbottom. We'd gone to Uzbekistan together to write a film about the ambassador in Uzbekistan who was one of the first people to blow the whistle on torture. He tried, while he was at the Foreign Office, to point out to the Foreign Office that a lot of the intelligence which was being used to hype up the Iraq War was actually being obtained by torture and that the British were complicit in that.

When I was with Michael, it was apparent that – exactly what I was talking about earlier – the two

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Sir David Hare

9 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

---

of us saw the film completely differently. I went ahead and wrote it and we went for lunch together and Michael said, 'This is not how I saw the film at all. I saw it as a farce with Steve Coogan...' and I said that I didn't see it as a farce with Steve Coogan, I saw it as a serious film about British complicity in torture. The producer said, 'I'm sure you two will eventually be able to argue it out and see eye to eye' and Michael, who's a really bright, lovely guy, just said 'No, I don't think we'll ever see eye to eye', and I said 'I don't think so either, we should just have lunch'. And that was it. We never discussed it. We just literally saw the film completely differently. So rather than go through the agonising process, that was a very civilised way to behave because we were never going to align what we saw in our heads... and so it was better to walk off.

**Q (from the floor):** Can I ask you to think about changing one of your beliefs, belief number three, that 'Tell, don't show' trumps 'Show, don't tell'? Don't you think that you use whichever emotes the most? Because sometimes it's dialogue, sometimes it's visual and as you showed with the *Ambersons* clip, that at times it's music.

**DH:** Completely. You're completely right. I think the crucial thing is don't duplicate; in other words, don't be doing the same thing with the words that you're doing with the images.

What's so beautiful in the *Citizen Kane* clip is that the composition of the picture is telling you about Bernstein, but Bernstein is telling you about the girl so the two things are doing different things, they are making it rich in that way.

I personally have a complete horror of voiceover and do everything I can to avoid it. But the first rule of v/o is that whatever the person is talking about must not be what you are showing. You must bring information that's different from what's being provided visually, so, yes, of course, I was just being provocative by saying 'Tell, don't show.'

Everything I have said, the opposite is also true... There are great films on which the screenwriter has been booted off and no attention has been paid to him whatsoever... but I still believe I should be there.

**Nigel Floyd (Host):** Can I ask about *The Reader* in that case? I am imagining that when you were discussing the courtroom scenes when Kate Winslet is describing all the events in the camp that you were under some pressure perhaps to visualise those scenes, but you chose instead to tell them and not to show them. Can you explain why you resisted that?

**DH:** No pyjamas, that's the rule. You can say, obviously, *Schindler's List*... you can say *Passenger* by [Andrzej] Munk ... *Passenger* is an absolutely convincing recreation of a concentration camp... but I personally am extremely squeamish about it and I, from the very beginning, said 'Absolutely no, I will not have visual illustration ... I can write you speeches which are strong enough that you will not long for to be shown what it is she is talking about.'

So it was partly an aesthetic thing that I felt very strongly, that such reconstructions, unless done with the thoroughness with which Spielberg did it... Maybe other people can point to fictional recreations that are not offensive, but by and large they [*Schindler's List* and *Passenger*] are just about the only two. And to use them as flashbacks just seems to be grotesque; morally objectionable. I'd put it as high as that; actually, the idea that we'll put some people in a camp to illustrate a speech... it just seems to me wrong.

**Q (from the floor):** The reason I love *The Hours* so much is that I feel it successfully almost translates on to screen a novel that people once considered unfilmable. I'm just interested to know if your experience in adapting the novel was particularly different because of its structure?

**DH:** Yes, I was slightly freaked by the fact that everybody told me the novel was unfilmable.

My experience of adaptation is that if you read it the first time and you don't know how to do it you will never know how to do it. I read *The Hours* and I knew how to do it the minute I read it and I would never take on a job of adapting something if I didn't know how to do it. I would never sit down and say, 'Oh, let's work out how to do this' because I don't believe you'll ever find how to do something ... it will become clear to you the minute you read it.

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Sir David Hare

9 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

---

With *The Hours* it was so clear to me how to do it that it slightly freaked me that everybody else was saying this book is unfilmable, and I kept going, 'I don't quite know why they are saying this,' but it did seriously begin to spook me.

I knew it was going to be fantastically complicated and that it was going to take a long time. Clearly the problem with the book was that it is a series of three interior monologues so you say to yourself 'Okay, I have to invent scenes in which characters say things to each other which are the equivalent to what is going on in the interior monologues. Everyone said to me 'How are you going to film interior monologues?' I said 'It's going to be rather exciting, actually. I'm going to make some scenes which are the equivalent of those interior monologues.'

Now, of course, that's going to be terribly challenging but I know how to do it, and I also knew that structure, the idea that you would have a tripartite structure was fantastically exciting because most films are Shakespearean; they go A plot, B plot and so you have two plots, usually.

At the same time as we were doing *The Hours*, [Guillermo] Arriaga was writing *Amores Perros*, and obviously working, as I was, on tripartite structures and we both had a whale of a time doing it because it is fantastically good fun. Three is a very good number because you can always refresh and go to a place where you're not expecting to go. Also what's great about it is the audience can't sense the structure so they have to go with it.

Again with most films what I'm saying about them being exciting at the beginning then less exciting in the middle then they're boring, you can feel the seventh reel in most movies – 'Oh, this idea has run its time, where are they going to find a new idea to regenerate it?' Then if they've been taught in a school in California, in the tenth reel the hero will meet an insuperable problem and then in the 11th reel he will overcome the insuperable problem. I can see insuperable problems coming a mile off... If anybody is happy in the ninth reel, if the screenwriter's been to school in California, they are going to be unhappy in the tenth reel before they can finally be happy in the 11th reel, and just certain structures are now so familiar that it has

convinced me that nearly all good work in the cinema now is going on outside genre. I know this is a hugely unpopular thing to say especially to academics who believe that only good things can happen in genre, but it seems to me all the interesting filmmaking that's going on at the moment, not all, but most of the interesting filmmaking is either to reinvent genre completely or to work outside genre because the audience knows the rules of genre and they're bored stiff by them; they've watched too many films that follow the same pattern and so all the stuff that's interesting is breaking genre up.

**Q (from the floor):** Have you ever struggled to create your characters or shape them? How have you resolved the struggle if you have?

**DH:** What do you mean by struggle?

**Q:** If you've got a character that's in your head but you can't fully bring them to life or they are not going where you think they should, or being who you think they should, and then if you have, how have you resolved that?

**DH:** More work, more work, more work. Daldry is a man who, when I've worked for him, wants to make his mind up at the last possible moment because of exactly what we're talking about, this idea of film as a communal projection, so he will probably have asked me to write the same scene in 50 ways before he commits to the one that satisfies him. So he both drives you absolutely insane but of course in the process of constant rewriting you do come upon stuff you might not. Now that is not something you want to be doing for idiots, the kind of producer who ... the usual thing is you present the script and the producer says, 'Oh I absolutely love that, the scene on the roundabout... that's absolutely fantastic. Can't we have much, much more of that?' And you say, 'The reason the scene on the roundabout works is because the previous scene was a funeral so you're cutting from the funeral and so the roundabout scene seems absolutely fantastic,' and the producer will then say, 'Well, do we have to have the funeral scene? Can't we just have more roundabout?' If you're dealing with idiots like that then it is not creative, but the real way you find characters is of course by search, search, search... again, all of the directors that I've named today are the people who are constantly

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Sir David Hare

9 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

---

asking you for more and more and more, a lot of which they throw away so you write much more than what finally appears ... which is a way of providing the subtext often to the work.

**Q (from the floor):** You know how you said a good script should be end-loaded and the outcome is more important than the proposition, do you think that also applies to a writer when he's coming up with the idea for the film, if it is an original screenplay. Is it a better film if he has that outcome in his head before the proposition?

**DH:** It made me laugh when I saw the film *Sliding Doors*, about a girl heading for an underground train and she gets through the doors, and because she gets through the doors her life has one outcome. But then they show what would have happened if the doors had closed and she'd never got on that train and how the outcome of her life was completely different. I'd had that idea about eight years previously; I'd literally said to somebody, 'Isn't it a wonderful idea if you showed somebody turning left and their destiny was such-and-such and then you showed them turning right and their destiny was completely different', to which the person asked a very intelligent question: 'Yes, but how does it end?' It's a very good question and they said to me, 'you know perfectly well that's a brilliant idea for a film, but that's all it is; it is not a film.'

And I did think with the greatest respect to the people who made *Sliding Doors* they had had as much trouble working that idea out as I anticipated they would. They made a jolly good fist of it but it's not actually a great idea because it's just a proposal, just an idea.

You see in Billy Wilder, who obviously begins films with brilliant ideas, that he is always working towards the end, and to me the greatest end of a film almost ever is the end of *The Apartment* when Shirley MacLaine, who realises that Jack Lemmon loves her, which has taken her a terribly long time to understand, runs through the New York street. That's a shot which, again like the shot in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, is a shot which you'd have to have a heart of stone not to burst into tears. But I doubt if that shot lasts eight seconds; it's six seconds, seven seconds ... because he is so sure of where he is going and you know a worse filmmaker would be, oh, helicopter shots and the

whole of New York traffic would come to a halt and there'd be a rain storm, the whole thing would be like that ... Wilder just puts it on Shirley MacLaine, six seconds – and you're just a mess, handkerchief time. It's because he's built to that; he knows that's where he's heading, just like he knows where he's heading in *Some Like It Hot*.