

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Aline Brosh McKenna

21 September 2010 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

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**Aline Brosh McKenna:** I don't give speeches a lot. My day is normally spent in a cave, in front of a computer, in a chair with a can of tuna fish. This is not my everyday experience, so we'll see how I do.

First of all I wanted to thank BAFTA for inviting me here, it's been such a pleasure. I'm so incredibly honoured to have been included in this group of writers. I think when you're putting together a lecture series and you have the writers of *The Pianist*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Queen*, *The Hours* and *Atonement*, your next natural thought is 'We've got to get the girl who wrote *27 Dresses*!' I think that's logical that I was the next person on the list. I would put my make-up montages up against Ronald Harwood's any day of the week. I feel good about that.

So when Tricia [Tuttle, event producer] called to talk to me about the lecture series, I got excited because it gave me a chance to talk about what I love about movies, and what particular kinds of movies I love. I realised that of my top four favourite movies, and I have four not five for some reason, three of them are set in a workplace.

That has always been something that fascinated me, movies about work. So it gave me an opportunity to think why that was, what is it that draws me to that. I think part of the reason that I've always been interested in that is because of my father, who really loved his job. He is an engineer and an inventor. He's 81 years old, he's still working, in fact he's going to be coming to Europe on Friday to take some meetings for a company he works with.

He has 30 patents, three of which were granted when he was 80. Some of my earliest memories of him are him saying 'You have to find something that gets you out of bed in the morning.' I think that's very, very good advice and I think it's also remarkable and indicative of him, that he would say that to a daughter in the '70s as readily as he would to his son. And so, in preparation for this event, I asked my Dad to describe one thing he invented. This is what he said: 'A micro miniature MEMS sensor which is based on the integration of mechanical elements, sensors and electronics on a common silicone substrate through micro fabrication technology.'

I think the other reason that I'm so fascinated with workplaces is because they have always seemed to me like an environment where you could get somewhere by working really hard. You could achieve based on merit and effort, and many of the movies for women are based around finding a man.

Anyone who's ever tried to look for a man knows that that's not a particularly merit-based enterprise. Work is a different story, so it leads to a different kind of story. I think the best way to illustrate this is with my first clip, a movie that was made in 1940. It may not be my actual favourite movie to turn on for fun, that would probably be *The Awful Truth* or *Midnight*, but I can actually say that this movie really changed my life. It's Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*.

*(Clip from His Girl Friday)*

That's one of the first movies I ever saw where I felt an instant recognition, that those are my people. I felt like I intuitively understood the way they were speaking to each other. I think part of what was so gripping about it is that he is treating her utterly as a peer. I didn't know when I saw it that that part had originally been written for a man, and then they changed the gender for Rosalind Russell, and [made] it a romantic comedy.

What's so compelling about it is he loves her and wants her as much because she's good at her job as – he mentions – that she's a pretty face. She is his equal, and she is always presented as his equal in that movie, and I thought that was a radical idea. The fact that it's a movie from 1940 sort of makes it even more impressive to me.

The next clip is going to show you something else which I really love about workplace comedies, which makes them so much fun to write, which is that they allow characters to really tell each other the truth. In the workplace you often need that level of honesty and that candour because you're trying to get something accomplished, so people don't have as much time to say nice things, and they have the ability to really cut to the quick.

It's one of the reasons that it's so much fun to write that dialogue. The funny thing is that my husband works at a corporation, and most

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corporations have official channels for feedback, reviews and assessments. We don't have that in show business; you get your assessment in other ways. That leads me to my next clip.

This is my favourite clip, from my favourite workplace comedy. I can say without equivocation this is my favourite scene from any workplace comedy.

*(Clip from Tootsie in which Michael (Dustin Hoffman) argues with his agent George (Sydney Pollack) over his ailing acting career)*

God I love that. I can't believe I'm actually going to show clips of my own work after showing you that clip. That is really something. I really hope that nobody takes it as an indication that I consider my work in the same class as the clips from two of the greatest comedies in history. So the first clip I'm going to show you demonstrates something that I also love about writing about the workplace, which is the opportunity to be accurate. To get into a world and try and really imbibe what it means to live in that world.

The greatest compliment is always, if someone works in these places and they say that it feels right. You can't ever get every last detail correctly, because these are fast moving businesses and shifting businesses, but if it feels correct, if we've sort of gotten the essence of it then I feel very proud of it. Getting backstage and being behind the curtain is one of the reasons that I wanted to be a writer, so that's something that I always love.

In the case of *The Devil Wears Prada* I was writing about a world that can seem very, very silly. It sort of contains its own parody. And really we never required any exaggeration to make it funny. You have very intelligent people who are talking in very serious tones about things which are really – on the face of it – ridiculous.

It is a real business, with real stakes and they have real talents and aesthetic values. It was really important to me and to the director to portray that. I'm going to show you a clip from the movie and then I'm going to tell you how I changed it to try and make it more accurate.

*(Clip from The Devil Wears Prada in which Nigel (Stanley Tucci) tells Andy (Anne Hathaway) to stop whining about her job)*

So when we were sort of close in to making the movie I had the opportunity to give the script to a couple of people who knew the fashion world really well. That scene had been written a little differently, he was really much more her friend and her confidante and somebody who was giving her a pep talk. One of the people I gave it to said 'This scene is completely unrealistic.' I asked why and he said 'It doesn't feel right because no-one in that world is nice to each other.'

I said that not everyone was nice to each other all the time, and he said 'No, they're *never* nice to each other. There's no reason to be, and they don't have time.' That was really a great insight, that allowed me to re-crack that whole character to be the mean mentor; that was a huge help.

The last clip of the night is from *Morning Glory*, which comes out in the fall in the US and I think early next year here.

It stars Rachel McAdams, Harrison Ford and Diane Keaton and was directed by Roger Michell, your own Roger Michell, who was a huge hero of mine before we made the movie together and I'm proud to report he's still a huge hero of mine now that we've made the movie together. The movie's about the world of morning news, which is another world that did not need much exaggerating for comic effect.

In this movie, what I really wanted to depict was the first time that a young woman is given a huge responsibility. In this case Rachel's character is producing a TV show, and she's the boss of Harrison Ford and Diane Keaton. What's interesting to me is right now in the US the statistics are that young women for the first time are out earning young men. So they're in the workplace now and having the same coming-of-age experiences and stories that men have had for generations, and that was so much of the fun of writing the movie, was to see her getting in there.

When I was in the middle of writing it, in my cave with the can of tuna fish and the computer and the chair, I happened to be reading an article by

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David Denby who's the critic for *The New Yorker* and one of my favourite movie writers. He wrote something that was very specifically encouraging to me.

He wrote: 'Out in the world women work hard, they have fights with their rivals, they have love affairs on the job, they commit or prevent crimes in corporate boardrooms, they get morally compromised or fired or promoted. Why not unleash Julia Roberts and Nicole Kidman, or Cate Blanchett or Charlize Theron, Kate Winslet or the avid Rachel McAdams into the morally complicated, corporate financial and political worlds where they can misbehave or have a ball and in the process fight their way to new or fresh stardom.'

I can't tell you how heartening that quote was for somebody who was sitting in an office trying to write a workplace comedy for Rachel McAdams. Ultimately to me these movies are about what it feels like to be in these rooms where decisions are being made, where people tell the truth to each other, where things are accomplished, where men and women are equals and can be peers, and where people have jobs that get them out of bed in the morning.

As Amelia Earhart once said 'I want to do something useful in the world.' I think it's incredibly important for women to be seen on screen doing something besides, or maybe in addition to, falling in love with a man.

In the clip that we're showing tonight, Rachel's character is trying to invigorate the show and there's a segment where the weatherman is supposed to be calling a segment from in front of the rollercoaster, and she puts him on the rollercoaster. And this is the conversation that she has with Harrison Ford's character, who is the anchorman, about the weatherman after that has occurred.

*(Clip from Morning Glory)*

APPLAUSE

Alright thank you very much for coming, thank you to BAFTA, now I'm going to sit and chat with Jason [Solomons, host] for a bit.

### Q&A

**Jason Solomons:** Why did you choose to be a writer?

**ABM:** I'm not a person who grew up as an intense film buff, I would say I'm more of a story buff, novels, plays and any kind of stories, movies also. I knew that I didn't have the constitution to write a novel, which is something that Pete [Morgan] mentioned yesterday. I found that it's a very good form for me because it's very collaborative, which is something that I love to do.

I don't really have a workplace, in the way that those movies have workplaces, but when you're making a movie you have a version of that even though it's sort of like a summer camp version. So it suits me that it's collaborative.

**JS:** Sometimes it isn't collaborative though, is it? You write something in your room, your cave, with your tuna fish, you write the script and off it goes. You might never see it again, or it's collaborative in the fact that it comes back and you don't know who's tinkered with it.

**ABM:** Right.

**JS:** But in Hollywood, and some of us might know Hollywood quite well but we're all here today so we're not in Hollywood, is the writer valued now? Do you get to go on set, as your words are being spoken by actors and used by directors?

**ABM:** You know, every movie is different. I've been lucky the last few times that I have been very involved in the process and have been there. That's what I love to do, and it's sort of contingent on the generosity of others. So when I get a chance to do it it's what I love to do. Sometimes they take it and run, and sometimes you're rewritten a lot before the movie ever gets made. They're really all different situations.

**JS:** Is there part of your writing that you don't mind being rewritten and part of it that you will fight for? I suppose the stage direction type stuff, the interior, the exterior, that kind of stuff?

**ABM:** I try not to take projects for which I wouldn't mind being rewritten, if that makes any sense. I try and choose things that are meaningful to me. But

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I love making little changes, and it's one of the reasons that I like to be there, so that you can make revisions and adjustments based on what's happening with the actors, what's happening with the scene and the location. I really love doing that.

And because it is a collaborative process there's nothing better than when you get a great idea or a great improv. There were a couple of times, when I was there, where [Meryl] didn't have a whole line, where she sort of fades out of a scene. And she said five different things to complete that sentence, all of which were hilarious.

**JS:** All hers?

**ABM:** Oh yeah. If you've created a world where people can play and have great ideas, it's a great feeling.

**JS:** When you started out writing your first screenplay, and you say *His Girl Friday* was a game changer for you, did you think you could just write and it would be completely there, that's your universe and no-one can touch it?

**ABM:** One of the things that I often talked to my friends about was that when anyone, or I, was complaining about how writers were being treated: it's not like anyone told you it was any different. It's not like the legendary stories of screenwriters having their work transformed, recorded verbatim on screen.

Everyone knows that there's a certain amount of [rewriting] involved. So it wasn't a huge surprise. Sometimes the way it happens is a surprise, but as I said I've been luckier than not in terms of having collaborators that I feel have valued what I put on the page.

**JS:** You're a glamorous lady. Does a writer have to be a public figure now in Hollywood?

**ABM:** That's nice. We are not a glamorous bunch. When we were out on strike we were picketing and yeah, it's a group with a lot of cargo shorts and sneakers. I have a friend who used to be an actor and is now a writer, and I always say he is the Prom King of the Writers' Guild. It's not really a looks-based enterprise. It's a great mix of people.

Women are underrepresented, unfortunately. It's a pretty 'guy' environment.

**JS:** Do you know why that is?

**ABM:** I'm not sure. I think I know why on the directing. It's very hard to be a director and have a family. It's just an intense workload. The writing, I'm not sure. The numbers are better for directing but they're certainly not 50-50. But as I said it's starting to change, women are getting more degrees, there are going to be more [women] lawyers and doctors than men soon. Women are out-earning men, so I'm assuming that it will all move in that direction.

**JS:** But in the literary world, I don't know what the weighting is, but I think it's fairly even. There are thousands of female writers and male writers. But in the script world in Hollywood... is that because it's seen as a job? Is it harder in some ways? Is it a macho world?

**JS:** I don't know if macho is where I would go. It's male but in a different way. It's not football player macho, but it can be a little bit of a guy's world.

The people who make movies are actually desperate for good material. They're desperate. And honestly if you write a brilliant script they really wouldn't care if you were a 95-year-old grandmother from Duluth. They really want something that's brilliant on the page. And it's actually one of the main reasons that I chose it, is that it's very subject to elbow grease, subject to hard work.

When people ask me what to do, one of the things I try and say without being facetious is 'Write something that you think is good, and keep writing it until you *really* think it's good.'

People are looking for things that are good. And it may not get made in the form that you intended or as quickly as you wanted, but it's a great form of writing in that sense. There is a very cleanly defined target. So that's always my advice, black marks on white paper.

**JS:** When you say they're looking for things that are good, what are they looking for? There is a certain formula to know to get them to see it – what might that be?

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**ABM:** How you get it to them is a slightly different issue. But you know, Alan Ball wrote *American Beauty* on spec, I believe. If you write something, just in your own cave with your own can of tuna, and you can put it on paper and you can get it to somebody who's even peripherally involved in the business and it is good – and by good I mean it's readable, it's entertaining. I'm not really talking about things which are way outside the classical storytelling form because that's much more of a judgement call.

But if you're writing something which really adheres to classical Hollywood storytelling you'll kind of know it. My first screenwriting teacher, I've only had one screenwriting teacher, but he said that by the time we reach adulthood we've experienced something like 10,000 hours of narrative. We're actually, as a culture, obsessed by narrative. We're watching movies and television shows, and now things on the internet and even games have a narrative to them.

We're so steeped in narrative that we know what a good story is, the problem sometimes for writers is that we can't actually see it in our own work, we're sort of unable to bring that same critical faculty that we bring to other people's work to our own. But I think everybody knows in their bones what's a good story, what's a good yarn.

**JS:** How much do they read before they decide whether it's a good story or not?

**ABM:** That's a good question. It helps to make the first ten pages as gripping as possible and as free of typos as is humanly possible.

**JS:** Presumably they would recognise typos.

**ABM:** You'd be surprised.

**JS:** You mentioned that you had one screenwriting teacher, where was that?

**ABM:** After I graduated from college – I went to Harvard – I wrote a humour book with my college roommate. And then she had the nerve to get a job writing for a television show in LA and left me. I took a six week class at NYU. Most of the things you can learn about screenwriting you can learn in six weeks, or three months, or a year.

I took a six week class where we had to complete a screenplay, and it was taught by this brilliant, brilliant man who was a playwright and a television writer and a screenwriter, whose name was Dick Beebe. He made us write a whole script. I wrote a very, very messy... I certainly didn't have Final Draft, but I don't think Final Draft existed; it was a lot of tab, tab, tab, tab, tab.

And I remember I was so young that I made the character 23 or 24, because that seemed so old, she really had some years on her. And then I just proceeded to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite that script over months. I tortured everyone I knew with it, and everyone I knew had read it. We did readings in my apartment, and Dick Beebe this wonderful teacher, read it three or four times after that.

And now I really understand how amazing it was that he did that, because I really don't know that I would do that for somebody, to read the same thing three or four times. I'd have to really like them a lot. And when I felt like that was in some shape I had a friend who had recently been made an agent and I sent it to him, and asked if he knew anyone who might want to represent me, and he did. That's how I started.

**JS:** And has that script been made?

**ABM:** That script is a blockbuster. No, that script got rewritten 50 times and it's sitting in a vault somewhere.

**JS:** And it taught you.....

**ABM:** Honing.

**JS:** When you say honing, what is it that you hone? Characters like the Stanley Tucci character in *The Devil Wears Prada* that you explained earlier?

**ABM:** Everything. Pretty close in I took that whole character and re-wrote every single scene he was in. I probably didn't change the structure of the story, but his attitude in every scene. I had a lot of trouble unlocking it until I had that insight. You just keep re-writing it, the dialogue and the story. The best way to write is to write.

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Someone said to me, I can't remember who, that the formula for success in writing is 'ass plus chair', that's the equation. It really is true, the way to do it is to do it and anyone who's done it knows it's excruciating.

I've had a term paper due for the last however many years of my life; I always have a term paper due. It's not a great feeling. I'm very suspicious of people who love to write, I don't understand it and I think their work is probably not very good. If you feel like you touch pen to paper and angels sing it's probably not so great. I find it excruciating and most of the writers I know find it excruciating.

**JS:** Where do you get your joy from it then?

**ABM:** Well that's the Dorothy Parker thing, I enjoy having written. I'll tell you what's the most fun, when you've worked really hard on something and you put it down for a couple of days, and you go back and re-read and you're like 'Who wrote this? What is this?' It's come from some part of you that's not really the conscious part. Sometimes writing under duress does that, for a deadline or you're panicked for some reason.

Sometimes that can unlock some part of you that creates something that you didn't create in your conscious mind. I really enjoy that.

**JS:** When someone like Stanley Tucci gets hold of a role – and he's brilliant in that role – what does the actor [bring to] the lines you wrote?

**ABM:** He was amazing. As I said we reconceived a little bit, and then I was there when we shot that and I remember saying to him that I was there, and did he want me to change, rewrite or fix anything. He said 'I'm good with what I have.' That was what he said and that was just an amazing marriage, that's really true for that whole movie, the movie was so spectacularly well cast. It's just the right marriage of the right person and the right character.

**JS:** In a way it's different because you were adapting that one, so you had a source material.

**ABM:** He's not in the book specifically; I amalgamated a bunch of characters to make him.

**JS:** When you were creating Miranda Priestley she was already a mythical figure in the book. Did you know when you were writing it that it was going to be Meryl Streep?

**ABM:** Not when I was writing it, not for the first five or six months. And then I went to meet with Meryl. She was amazing in that she wanted to say very little, so there's a scene in the movie where she goes to see the designer's collection. I had written that she talks through the whole thing; she goes through his collection and delivers these withering critiques.

But she didn't really want to say that much so I flipped that whole scene so that she does nothing but purse her lips, and she was thrilled with that. She's not an actor who's saying she wants lines for lines' sake. The second half of the process I knew it was going to be Meryl.

**JS:** In the book she's based, presumably, on Anna Wintour.

**ABM:** I don't know Anna but I've seen *The September Issue*, and the character is very different from Anna. Anna's very, very quiet. Meryl has that very calm centre, she never yells. But the big speech she makes about the cerulean blue, I don't think that's something that Anna does. I was never thinking 'What would Anna Wintour do?', ever. It was a different character.

**JS:** You said you were looking at the David Denby piece and you were writing a comedy for Rachel McAdams at that time. Even though that was commissioned and you knew who was going to be playing the part, do you always write for someone in your head?

**ABM:** No, I don't. When I'm first imagining it, it would be strange to have actors in it. Then once I have the actor, I can imagine them in it. I don't know why. In *Morning Glory* Rachel's in pretty much every single scene and I can't now separate at all the character of Becky Fuller from Rachel. They're inseparable to me.

**JS:** Those jobs that you get when you're either adapting a screenplay or you know for whom you're writing, I presume the studio ask you to write this or you have the idea and they give you an actor back? Is that how it works?

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**ABM:** It's all different. You know, *Prada* was just a book that I desperately wanted to do and they finally gave it to me. *27 Dresses* is based on my best friend who's been in 12 weddings which I thought was pathological, and I still do.

And *Morning Glory* was an original idea that I'd had, and then I had a producer and we got Roger and then we got the actors. So they're all very different.

**JS:** So how does that work, you have your original story, your agent, I don't know if it's the same one that took that first script from you...?

**ABM:** Nope, I changed agents twice.

**JS:** Do you give it to your agent when you're just chatting and hanging out, and you say to Roger Michell you've got this idea?

**ABM:** Again, it's all different. With *27 Dresses* I really did the dog and pony show. I took it to everyone who would sit [and listen]. I think I pitched it nine or ten times and I got passes from every single person, [except for] this gentleman Jon Glickman, who works at Spyness.

I had brought a producer with me, Bobby Newmyer who had produced *Three To Tango* and was a dear, dear friend of mine. We took it to Glickman, and I then worked on it for a long time. Then I left the movie and he worked on it for a long time, and he really was the person who pushed and pushed and got it made.

*Morning Glory* came out of a meeting that I had with JJ Abrams where we just hit it off and it was a world that I'd had in my head for a while. JJ is incredibly funny and witty and fast, and I just felt like he would really get that world. So I worked on it with JJ for a while, and then I worked on it for a long time after Roger came aboard.

**JS:** The point that fascinates me is how come you were having a meeting with JJ Abrams? What does JJ stand for, did he tell you?

**ABM:** I think his original given name is Jeffrey. Somebody said 'You guys should meet, you would like each other.' That's how it happened.

**JS:** You were talking about workplace comedies, you've referenced *Tootsie* and *His Girl Friday*; these are zinger classics, almost rom-coms. JJ Abrams made *Cloverfield*, which is not such a workplace – or romantic – comedy.

**ABM:** No, but he's also done *Felicity* and *Alias*, and when I sat with him I didn't really know that much about him personally. He's incredibly funny and sharp, and that whole movie was made in an environment of unbelievably sharp, witty and fun people. So I had an instinct that that would be a good home for it.

**JS:** It's emerging from the clips that you've chosen that you have a yen for funny dialogue that is fast-paced and zingy. Would those be the influences that you've always gone for? Did you read IAL Diamond and Billy Wilder scripts?

**ABM:** Well, when I say my favourite movies there's my contemporary movies and then there's the classic movies and Billy Wilder is really the exemplar for me of the person who does the funny and the heartfelt. I'm a huge, huge Billy Wilder person.

*His Girl Friday* really opened up this whole other world of movies for me. It was back in the time when, if there were DVDs, I didn't have them. I went to revival houses in New York and in Cambridge, in college, and just soaked up those movies. There are contemporary movies that sort of harken back to that. I would say my personal taste is for things that feel a little more written. I also love Woody Allen, so I love things which are about smart people.

**JS:** It's interesting that you mentioned the female roles, [that] it would be nice to have women on screen who weren't just talking about falling in love with men. Both Woody Allen, and Howard Hawks of course, seem to come up with dames and broads... The big complaint from critics now is that we don't see enough of those characters. Maybe because it's hard to write them. If there are more women screenwriters it seems to add up that there would be stronger female characters on screen.

**ABM:** I'll tell you, it's extremely hard to write a movie which is all about love, where the character wants love and that's what they're

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trying to do, fall in love. *27 Dresses* was extremely hard to write, it's just very hard to strain someone's life down to that one through line. I find it much harder in a way as opposed to someone who's busy doing something else and they fall in love.

I don't think I've ever written anything that had no love story in it, and it's incredibly important but often it's somebody who's doing something else and because of another experience that they had they transform themselves in such a way that they're able to find love in a different way or for the first time. Movies that are just solely about 'I want to be in love,' [are] actually more challenging to write.

**JS:** You've mentioned that that's the sort of genre you're drawn to, but in Hollywood you want to be a professional scriptwriter. If someone came to you, like at the JJ Abrams meeting, and said he was doing a big sci-fi, actiony, *Star Trek* kind of thing, and 'Can you give me some jokes?'...

**ABM:** I've done that, sure. Sometimes they give me stuff and I'll write some jokes for it, or sometimes the female character is not quite what she should be and I'll help out with that. I'm not that specific actually with respect to genre.

**JS:** But that's a key day-to-day aspect [being a script doctor] of a writer's life it seems to me, especially in Hollywood; having input and beefing up characters in other people's work. It's romantic to imagine that the writer is just the sole author of this one untouchable script.

**ABM:** A lot of the big movies are not solely authored movies. A lot of the real big, big ones that you see have had a line of the people out the door.

**JS:** So how do you get onto those teams?

**ABM:** Sometimes it's through someone that you know. Sometimes there's a particular aspect of your work that they want to see if they can infuse. Sometimes it's a really natural fit, or sometimes they just need ten jokes, or sometimes they just need fresh eyes, somebody who has a different perspective on it. Those can be really fun jobs, they're much more social because you're usually being parachuted into a situation where they're already in progress, they have director, producer,

actors and you sort of hop in for a minute, do a little bit of this or that and then you go. It's a different kind of work.

**JS:** You mention *The Devil Wears Prada* and I know you've adapted Allison Pearson's novel ['I Don't Know How She Does It']. These are good books in the first place, how much do you want to change, how much do you respect another writer?

**ABM:** Allison's book, I loved so much when it came out. We'd moved out to do some renovations and I was moving back into my house, and it was the first book that I unpacked. I stood there for a minute and re-read some of my favourite passages. This is true.

Not more than a few days later David Frankel, who had directed *Prada*, emailed me and asked if I had any interest in adapting [it for him], with Sidney Pollack and Anthony Minghella producing. I said, 'The sound you hear is me dropping everything else to the ground to do that.'

That was, I want to say four and a half years ago. It's been a long road. We have a different director now, Doug McGrath who did *Emma* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. We lost both Anthony and Sidney along the way, which was brutal. But I love that book so much.

**JS:** Is it going to be set here?

**ABM:** No. It was actually an interesting thing because I tried to write the script without voiceover, for a long time. And there were so many brilliant bits of writing that I could not wedge into anybody's mouth. So I just finally chucked it, and there's tons, there's *Casino* level dialogue, there's so much voiceover.

**JS:** But it's great for you, you can just go cut and paste her words.

**ABM:** There's so many things in that book that I think about and say all the time, it's just so great. The big requirement of that job, and to a certain extent with *Prada* too, was to really create a big enough plot, enough of a superstructure. What was great about both of those books was the really intense specificity. A working mom is as

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much of a workplace as any other great workplace; a different kind of cast of characters.

In Allison's book we changed the thrust of the end of the movie, that's different from the book. And because what I write is not hugely plot driven, it's sort of a balance of enough plot to keep the soufflé standing.

**JS:** Yeah. They're the kind of movies that I like; no explosions, they're set here and now, no-one's in a spacesuit, there are no doors going 'psst', it's great.

**ABM:** You just wait, I'm getting there.

### Q&A

**Q (from the floor):** Do you think that women writers are herded into a rom-com ghetto?

**ABM:** I don't, actually. Andrea Berloff, who is a friend of mine and wrote *World Trade Center*, Laeta Kalogridis – there's a lot of really great female writers. Susannah Grant, she writes funny stuff too and love stories, but she writes more dramatic pieces. It's really about what's on the page.

The funny thing about *Prada* was that they had tried other writers and I was the first woman that they tried, oddly enough. So I think it's partly that women can be drawn to a certain kind of story. Some of the great romantic comedies have been made by men. And two of my last three were directed by men. So I feel like you just put your sensibility on the page.

**Q (from the floor):** In terms of films with female protagonists in, with any kind of story, are they effectively thinking rom-com first of all?

**ABM:** Well here's the thing with all protagonists: who's a movie star? In terms of the Hollywood system, not outside of Hollywood, who's a star? The more female stars there are, the more females are doing it. But it's a chicken and egg thing and one of the things about the screwball era was that you had people like Claudette Colbert and Joan Crawford, Bette Davis. A lot of huge, huge stars were women.

So there was maybe a broader scope. Some of that work now is being done on television, but I think it's one of the things that's great about this job, you can create your own market for your own type of work.

**Q (from the floor):** I was wondering whether the way in which you write scripts now has changed substantially from when you were back in NYU?

**ABM:** Yes, definitely. That was a lot of 'Eyes closed, looking for the light switch.' A lot of trial and error. One thing that's really great about screenwriting is that it's very highly subject to practice.

I did a couple of panels with Michael Arndt who wrote *Little Miss Sunshine*, and he cited this study about the 10,000 hours – do you know about the 10,000 hours? It's what you need to be an expert at something; which is roughly like 10 years of doing something 20 hours a week. And the more you do, the better you get. So when I'm talking to other writers I often say 'Black marks on white paper.' That's how you can write your way out of something, but you have to be writing, and writing consistently.

You can't get any better by thinking about writing or complaining about writing or talking about writing. What makes you better is writing. So by virtue of the fact that I've been doing it for a while now, there are some mistakes that I don't make as readily. There's just a few things that I've picked up along the way that are helpful.

**JS:** So if you're stuck, and you're being paid so you have to deliver, how do you do it?

**ABM:** If I'm really stuck I'll print it out and read it, and try and experience it as a movie and try and speak back to it as a viewer.

I try to experience it as if I'm completely new to it. It can be very pleasurable, but it can also result in cursing. You don't really ever know until you re-read it, but when I was starting out I used to print it and re-read it constantly because I was sort of refining that skill. I don't have to do that as much.

**Q (from the floor):** Having seen some of your movies and loved *The Devil Wears Prada*, do screenwriters go off and write a theatre play or

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write for television? And would you want to, or does one really tend to do one thing?

**ABM:** I've written a play and a half. When I was young some friends and I had a little theatre company and we did short plays. I wrote television for five years, I wrote a bunch of pilots. There's so many great opportunities, it just depends. There's certainly so many great women working in television. And television is having a golden age right now so there's a lot of great opportunities. It's wide open.

**JS:** How much stuff have you got that hasn't been produced?

**ABM:** I think I wrote eight or nine pilots and we shot three of them. One of the things that I found tough about television, and one of the reasons that I don't do it anymore, is after the pilot season they just throw it out, and that always killed me.

With movies, and *I Don't Know How She Does It* is a good example, I've been working on it for a long time and if you love it and you have people who love it, you can keep it. Some of them take years and years to get made. A lot of those pilots, it was heartbreaking for me to watch them just sort of go down the chute.

**Q (from the floor):** I wanted to ask you about *Cinderella*. I don't know what stage that project's at but I was thinking about the character of Cinderella. In traditional versions you could see her as quite a passive heroine.

**ABM:** It's an incredibly passive story. It's kind of remarkable that way in that it's somebody who vaguely wants something, everything is bestowed on her, she goes to a party and she goes home and she waits for a shoe.

But it's one of those things that I call the lizard brain story, there's something so deep not for women but for men I think: I'm overlooked, someone sees that I have promise, someone takes me to the big show – and that's where I really belong – and someone's trying to keep me from that. I think the *Cinderella* story can be for men and women.

It's a great story to try and re-imagine, and to imagine her as somebody who has something on

her mind besides wanting a prince. Besides, and in addition to, wanting a prince there are some other things that she wants. It's really fun.

**JS:** Did you have an idea that you wanted to update the *Cinderella* story and go to your agent, or was it a studio head looking for it?

**ABM:** That one was. Simon Kinberg (*Mr and Mrs Smith*) and I share offices. I had said to him 'You know I just feel like the *Cinderella* story is ripe for re-imagining,' and we talked about it a lot and then found a way into it that seemed really interesting.

He's also a producer – he's producing the *X-Men (First Class)* movie – so we went out, with him to produce it and me to write it.

**JS:** It's an original idea then, apart from *Cinderella* not being that original?

**ABM:** Yeah, it's funny because it's in the public domain; no-one owns *Cinderella*, even though Disney obviously has made many *Cinderella* movies.

**JS:** Is it modern day?

**ABM:** It's not modern day, no.

**JS:** Does it have mice and pumpkins and all that?

**ABM:** You will see my friend, you will see.

**Q (from the floor):** Obviously you're working in a very well honed system. I wondered to what extent you or your collaborators, when writing, are actively talking about the audience. Or is that unhelpful?

**ABM:** Interesting. That's a really good question. I think people are better at knowing what *they* like than what other people like; that's what I've found. One of the things that is very freeing is that when I write things that I find incredibly personal and weirdly incriminating, those are the things that are the most resonant.

I think Allison's book is a great example of that. She really depicts motherhood in this way that's incredibly brave, and so specific. That's what makes that book so universal, and that's the same

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thing with *Prada*. I always felt like there was an aspect of that which was very, weirdly, autobiographical for me, even though I never worked there and it was based on a book.

Certainly with *Morning Glory*, no-one's seen it but the character that Rachel plays is a very energetic, nerdy, avid striver from New Jersey. I called Roger one day with a bit, something that I had been saying my whole life, and I was sort of embarrassed to tell him the story, and he said 'Oh, you must put that in our screenplay.'

It was something that I thought only pertained to me. Often the thing that you think only pertains to [you] is the thing that speaks most to everyone, and the thing that you're trying to anticipate that other people will like is a dud. It's funny how that works. So being as specific and as true to your own truth is the most universal thing you can be writing.

**Q (from the floor):** I wanted to ask a question about *Broadcast News*. *Morning Glory* is obviously set in a TV station in the same way. When I was watching *The Devil Wears Prada*, for some reason that movie kept coming into my mind, a workplace comedy. Is that a film you admire?

**ABM:** Love. I'm a huge Jim Brooks fan, just across the board. Mary Tyler Moore, *Terms of Endearment*, *Broadcast News*. I would say that Jim Brooks and Cameron Crowe sort of carry the mantle of Billy Wilder as much as anyone. I'm a huge, huge fan of Jim's and I love *Broadcast News*, one of my favourites.

*Morning Glory* is different in that *Broadcast News* really is a love story triangle, and *Morning Glory* is less about that. It's more about the father-daughter relationship between Rachel and Harrison, so it's not a classical rom-com in the way that *Broadcast News* is.

But it was certainly daunting, because that movie is such a classic, and particularly important to writers, partly because of who Jim is. But I felt that enough time had elapsed so that we could take a look at what had happened in the news business since *Broadcast News* and examine it in a different way. When Jim was making that movie the business was starting to transform into news as

entertainment, that we really are all very familiar with now.

And that was still in the era – at least in America – of the single, white, male anchorman behind a desk in stentorian tones telling you what's what. Well now two of the three anchors on the American news are women, and the news has really softened a lot. In *Broadcast News* there's that thing where she shows the film of the dominoes falling, and she's really horrified by it, and everybody applauds.

She's very scandalised by that, but now that would be hard news compared to what people are reporting. Jason was just showing me, on the cover of the paper, his gossip is reported now as news-news. I wouldn't say it's primarily about that, but it's a different look at that.

Also, I don't know how many of you are Mary Tyler Moore fans, but it's an astonishing show. Astonishing.

**JS:** It's that energy of *Broadcast News* that we love as well, how you match that ferocity of dialogue.

**ABM:** And the specific idiosyncrasies of that girl, the speed walking, the sweater with the shoulder pads, 'How are you at back rubs?' He's very, very fearless about making her flawed.

**Q (from the floor):** You've mentioned Billy Wilder a few times. I just watched *The Apartment* again after years, and there's wonderful pathos in it, particularly at the end. You've mentioned pathos which is clearly important to you. Do you think about where to put such moments or do they just come along?

**ABM:** That's interesting, calibrating the comedic with the more dramatic. There's no science to that, really. One of the reasons that clip from *Tootsie* is just so funny is that it's also sad, and it's so grounded in you understanding who that guy is, who that character is.

If you really understand the characters and are deep into their psychology you can get the funny and the heartfelt for sure. And sometimes people forget about the emotional back story. One of the producers I work with always wants to know who

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the parents are. He would have a ten minute segment of group therapy in the middle of every movie. But it's really important to know where the characters are coming from.

For example *27 Dresses* was based on my best friend, who's an inveterate people pleaser, and that's what that movie's about to me. I know that it's got the bridesmaids' dresses and all that, but to me it's about the unfortunate thing that women sometimes do, of becoming the person who will drive anyone to the airport at any time, for any reason.

And it was very important to understand why she's that way. Interestingly, the thing that's in the movie has nothing to do with my friend's family situation at all. But it was important to put something in there that would make you understand how she became a care taker of others. That provided what there is in that movie of her moments of sadness and pathos.

**JS:** When you're a novelist I would think the hardest thing is the dialogue. What's the biggest pain in the arse about scriptwriting?

**ABM:** You know what's really hard? Transitions; they either come out like 'I know exactly what to do,' and it goes right or you kind of stare at them for a while and they seem like stubby ends.

The first few scripts I wrote, every scene ended with 'Well I guess I'll see you in the next scene.' And every scene began with 'Remember when we saw each other in the last scene? Well here we are in this scene.'

There are two things that are the mark of a great writer: exposition, which is brutal, and how well you do your transitions. Often if you're really good you can combine those two, but transitions are a lot of the game. Writing explanations for things is excruciating. The better you can bury it the better writer you become. That's one of the things you sort of learn over time.

My old writing partner and I used to have characters we would call Expo Man, who would show up and say 'Well why did you do that?' and 'When are you doing that?' No-one would want to play that part.

**JS:** In rom-coms it's the best friend, like Laura San Giacomo, she did it best in *Pretty Woman*. But often they just stand there and go 'Well, you're never going to do that again.'

**ABM:** You know what's funny is that character is almost always me. When I was writing *27 Dresses* I could have written a thousand pages for Judy Greer's character.

My friend Kate once got an email asking her to dog sit and she didn't know who they were. No-one would ever ask me to do that. So that character who says 'You need to have better boundaries' – I created one. There's some in *I Don't Know How She Does It*, but I created one who really gives the main character a hard time and I named her Allison.

**JS:** That's what's so good about that scene from *Tootsie*; the exposition and comedy.

**ABM:** What's great about that scene is that he's raising money for the play, [which] helps soften how selfish what he's doing is and how he's hurting Teri Garr by taking her part.

Burying exposition with a joke is something that television writers tend to do very well. Obviously Jim Brooks is a great television writer. If you can bury the exposition, or the pipe as they call it, with humour that's really great. It's very hard to do.

**Q (from the floor):** Your films, although they're comedies and lightweight, are actually quite moral films. I wondered if you thought consciously about the moral side of it when you were writing, and also if there were things that you wouldn't do because they wanted a female serial killer and you didn't think that was a good idea? Do you not like doing movies with guns, or any of those kind of genres?

**ABM:** That's interesting. I'm highly judgemental – I think you'd find unanimity on that – and I think a lot of writers are because you have to make those sorts of judgements about the world and about characters. That said, if you don't love your characters, you don't see the humanity in [them]. For me, my point of entry in *Prada* is as much Miranda as it is Andy.

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The same thing in *Morning Glory* with Harrison's character; I felt as connected to writing him and he's very opinionated and irascible. So the moral judgements tend to come from both sides. You often have judgemental people with opposing [views], like the *Tootsie* scene and *His Girl Friday*, they're both right and that's really what you're striving for in a good scene.

As to whether I've ever passed on anything because I thought morally it was not right, I really can't think of anything that springs to mind, except if it just didn't strike me as a good idea. That's not a moral judgement I guess; a different kind of judgement, perhaps.

**JS:** I was going to ask this earlier, but how important is it for you to say something with your stories?

**ABM:** Not something political; something about life certainly. Very early in my career I wrote a script that had two female characters in it and it didn't work so great. When you have a script that doesn't work great you can have some excruciating conversations, and in that conversation the producer suggested to me that those two female characters could perhaps be hookers.

You know what, if creatively it had worked and been helpful I would have done it, but it wasn't helpful. If it had solved the story problem I might have gone for it.

**JS:** You said earlier that in Hollywood, as a writer, you get your assessments elsewhere. We get our assessments in the workplace because people are brutally honest. Where do you get them?

**ABM:** When you're making a movie it's a bit like going to war. Hopefully you're on the same side, but it's a high stakes environment, so people do tend to say things to each other that you might not even say to your spouse or family member. And I loved that about it.

I so value frankness. You have to tell someone, you have to say what your emotional response is to something in order for it to work. It doesn't really work if you are not frank in those assessments. And I tend to really treasure the

moments where the people I worked with really talked turkey to each other.

**JS:** What's the biggest shock you've had?

**ABM:** The *Prada* scene that I showed where he says 'You're whining, you're whining,' came out of when you're in your 20s and you graduate from college and go out in the world and think you're owed something. And, as everyone says, you have this incredible sense of knowing everything and it goes downhill from there.

When I was in my early 20s it was perplexing to me how difficult it was. It is what it is, complaining about it isn't going to make it better. If you want this to work there are steps to take, and do it. I certainly had that exact experience, maybe not verbatim but I certainly had experiences that were just like that. I think a lot of people have.

**JS:** Do you still get them; big directors and producers saying to you 'No, that's rubbish'?

**ABM:** Definitely. One of my favourite Minghella moments, working on *I Don't Know How She Does It*, [was when] we had a script meeting with him and Sidney. We were going through the script and Anthony was very carefully giving me.....and I'm sure many of you knew him, he was an incredibly eloquent person who spoke – as someone said – in incredible paragraphs with indentations, they were beautiful, beautiful.

He was going through the script and saying these incredibly insightful things. And then he got to one page, and said 'And this page...' [Brosh McKenna gives a gentle, approving look] and then he turned the page. I love that.

**Q (from the floor):** Could you describe a normal working day for you? How long do you write for each day?

**ABM:** I take the kids to school, usually. Or I go to the gym, so I'm usually in the office around nine, and I write until five, give or take.

**JS:** Where's your office?

**ABM:** It's about a mile and a half from my house, it's on a little studio lot and I've been there for many years.

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**JS:** Which studio?

**ABM:** It's just a little soundstage area, it's not a studio. It's right in Hollywood. I do take a break for lunch. If Simon's there sometimes we order in lunch.

**JS:** Where do Hollywood writers go for lunch?

**ABM:** I'll order in. It's funny, it's like that Seinfeld thing where George Costanza has a meeting at two o'clock and he says 'Two o'clock? I have two o'clock meetings my whole day.' If I have a lunch, that's going to knock out a lot of writing time, so I try to do breakfast if I have to.

It's the least glamorous profession you could ever imagine. I went to speak to some film students, and I was saying 'Don't imagine yourself having any glamorous experience. Imagine yourself in a pair of stretchy pants, sitting in a chair trying not to spill your Diet Coke on your screen.'

They all kind of stared at me and then one of them raised their hand and said 'Have you ever been to an Awards show?' If you go into writing to go to Awards shows you'll be sadly mistaken. You'll be very disappointed. So anyway, then I'll go home and I'll hang out, and have dinner.

And depending on what phase I'm in, if I'm really busy or something's in production, I will often go back to work. I won't say often, but with some frequency, go back to work after the kids go to sleep and do another little chunk of time.

**JS:** In your own home?

**ABM:** In my house, yeah. Sometimes I'm in bed, my husband hates it. He has one earplug because of the clack, clack, clack.

**JS:** Do you write on a Mac?

**ABM:** I'm a Mac person. A lot of writers are Mac people.

**JS:** And a screenwriting programme?

**ABM:** I use Final Draft. People tell me there are others that are better but I'm just really used to it. Before I had kids my day wandered around a lot

more, I would start later, and actually one of the great things about having a family is I really don't have time to mess around as much as I did before. I find ways to, but I really have to get the large majority of it done before dinner time and that's actually been tremendously helpful.

And having a place to go outside the house has been very helpful to me too. A lot of writers like the fact that they have a workplace where they can write in their underwear and sit in their house all day, and I find it so deeply depressing. If I can't put pants on it's just a bad day. It means I have the flu, I don't like it.

**JS:** I'm glad you did tonight.

**Q (from the floor):** When you have the germ of an original idea, what's the journey before you begin to know what kind of film it's likely to be? You must be conscious that you're going to have to pitch it and say who the audience is, and the kind of questions that producers and financiers inevitably ask. So what is that journey for you, from the very beginning of a theme, or a character, that interests you?

**ABM:** I usually find someone to talk to, and it's usually a producer. Not everybody is like that. Some of my best and closest relationships are with producers – like Bobby [Newmyer] who I worked with on *Three To Tango* and *27 Dresses* and JJ [Abrams] on *Morning Glory* – because you're often doing a lot of work before the director comes. Then when the director comes you're usually less in the conceiving part and more in the shaping and making part. So for the conceiving part I have producers that I like and often the thing will begin in conversation with them where I have an idea, a world or characters, or a sense of what it should be.

When I talk to people whose opinion I really trust, who are good sounding boards for me, I often discover whether it's something that I think I could bring something to. That's often how it happens for me. So it's great, and this could be anyone, because on my first script it was my writing teacher and my friends.

I had a friend in particular who, god bless him, read so many drafts of that thing. It's always great to have a sounding board. I try to find people

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who are honest, because there's just a remarkable amount of times when you give it to people and they just say 'It's great honey,' which is not helpful.

**Q (from the floor):** [indistinct, possibly about having a writing partner].

When I wrote television I wrote *with* someone, and I've never really written a screenplay with someone until recently. I met this writer and we just sort of had an overlap in our sensibilities and what we wanted to do, so in the early part of the year we wrote a script together, also for JJ.

It was great fun, it was really like summer camp, and it was like taking a break... just to not have the loneliness of going back in there every day, into total quiet. But I think it was partly really fun because I knew it wasn't forever. We're still working on it. But it's really a fun break from the solitude.

**JS:** How different is that process? Do you say 'I'm going to do the transitions, you do the expositions'?

**ABM:** Very. You know every writing partnership does it differently, we actually wrote 99% of it sitting in the same room, just because it was more fun.

**JS:** Speaking?

**ABM:** Aha, and one of us typing. That was just more fun. One of the reasons we did it was just to have a good time doing it. But I know a lot of writing teams split, and they email each other. In the revising phase we did some more of that, swapping it back and forth, but for the actual writing from scratch we did a lot of it just talking to the computer.

I realised I'm not used to hearing anything when I write. I read it back. Some writers speak it back to themselves, which I don't do. And I wasn't used to speaking when I was typing. So if he wasn't standing over my shoulder I would stop thinking he could hear my thoughts, I would just continue typing. I realised I had to speak it out loud, and I'm not used to doing that.

**JS:** Are we going to see that script?

**ABM:** I hope so. We're still working on it.

**Q (from the floor):** It's a bit of a superficial question, but I find it to be one of the hard bits of writing. How do you name characters?

**ABM:** That's a good question. Everything from any lists of names that you can find, directories. My kids go to a Jewish school, that's not incredibly helpful, everybody would be named Goldberg. And there's no Jews in movies.

**JS:** The Coen Brothers are great at names.

**ABM:** They are?

**JS:** Joel Coen comes up with these great names.

**ABM:** I am sort of obsessive about it. I got mocked by the people who work with JJ because, for the first week that I wrote that script, all I did was email them lists of names. It becomes very important, because they become like people.

**JS:** Give us some of the names that you have for your characters.

**ABM:** Well, in *27 Dresses* I named her Jane, which is plain Jane and I always thought I would change it but we never did.

**JS:** Does she have a surname too?

**ABM:** Jane Nichols. Her sister's name is Tess Nichols and I had originally written a joke where Jane's so stressed out trying to plan her sister's wedding, she messes up the invitation and the last name is spelt with a 'T'. That joke is not in the movie, but that's how I named that character.

In *Morning Glory* we have an old, venerable anchorman and Mike Pomeroy was his name. We were striving for something like, and I don't know who the British equivalent is, but Mike Wallace, Dan Rather, those kinds of guys. Something that's really American and sort of solid. And then the character of the energetic gal that Rachel McAdams plays is Becky Fuller. I don't know, it's a very inexact 'you'll know it when you see it' kind of thing.

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**JS:** There's a good throwaway line there, 'There are no Jews in movies,' that you said.

paper first and then worry. There's certainly lots of great actresses dying for great parts.

**ABM:** There's no Jews in movies.

**JS:** Is that from on high, is that an 11th Commandment thing?

**ABM:** No, it's just there's a lot of Jewish sensibility in movies and television obviously, but I don't know if in the entire run of *Seinfeld* they ever mentioned being Jews and that is probably the definitive document of being a Jewish American.

They never talk about it, but I don't think anyone's confused about it. But you don't really see a lot of movies where people are talking about their Jewishness, even if the sensibility is incredibly Jewish. I love the Brits; I'm a huge, huge Richard Curtis fan. I think that Jews and Brits actually have a lot in common in terms of sensibility, of being self-deprecating, a little bit dark, overcooking our food. I think there's actually a lot, you know that sort of slightly self loathing, cynical funniness. I actually feel like there's a lot of overlap there.

**JS:** Ah, good. I'm both of those things, but it's true I overcook. I over cater at least. There was a final question from a lady just here, that's brilliant.

**Q (from the floor):** How receptive are the Hollywood studios to pitches for films that are built around strong female characters, and has that changed over time?

**ABM:** Well, one of the great things about *The Devil Wears Prada* was that it was based on a book, with two great female protagonists. I don't know. There is and there isn't. I don't know that there's a specific conscious resistance to it, occasionally there is, or you hear that there is.

But you know, look at somebody like Angelina Jolie, who's carving out a career doing roles that – in the case of *Salt* – was written for a man, and her sensibility's not what we would consider that softer rom-com sensibility. And she's one of the biggest stars on the planet, and she has her own brand of what she does.

Maybe it's only to pep myself up, but I have a 'if you build it they will come' attitude. Put it on