

Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Sir Ronald Harwood CBE

23 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

Ronald Harwood: Good evening, and thank you all for coming. It's always a great relief to hear myself described as a writer, because many years ago I arrived in New York off Concorde and the immigration officer looked at my passport and said: 'You must be doing pretty good,' and I said 'Well, modestly. I make a living.' He said, 'The tips must be terrific.'

I said, 'Tips? I don't get any tips.' He said, 'You don't? But it says here you're a waiter.' I said, 'No, writer!' I have to begin with an apology, I'm sorry that I've been unable to attend the lectures given by my distinguished colleagues, so I'm a little apprehensive about repeating what they may have already said.

Those of you who have attended some or all of the others, if I do say things you've heard before you can simply call out, 'That section needs work,' or, 'You can cut that.' Or even, 'Let's get another writer,' and I shall be perfectly understanding. *In extremis* you can all go home, but I hope you won't do that.

There may, however, be another reason why you'll want to leave. About 30 years ago, William Goldman wrote a book in which – as I'm sure you'll all know – he famously came to the conclusion about the film industry, that nobody knows anything. I must confess, right at the beginning, that I wholeheartedly subscribe to that view, and from even the time that has passed since he wrote it, nothing has changed. Nobody knows anything. And that alas includes me.

I'd better say, very quickly, that I have a qualification about Goldman's dictum and that is while it's perfectly true that I know nothing about writing screenplays in general, I believe I do know something about my own way of writing them, or approaching them.

What I like to call, rather pompously you may think, my creative process. And it's about that process and how I learnt the craft I now practice, that I want to talk tonight. Everything I have to say about writing screenplays is from my own very limited perspective, and no other. It is impossible, in my view, to legislate for other writers.

My background has been, for the most part, in the theatre. From a very early age I wanted to be

an actor, and indeed became an actor – a rather bad actor – for several years, without ever making a living before starting to write. I've written in almost every genre, except poetry. But for the past 30 years, most of my original output has been for the theatre.

If an idea occurs that excites me and takes root, it'll be one that I think of as a play and in no other way. The writing of plays and screenplays are very different, well they are for me. How can I best explain? It's rather like a conversation I was present at when a woman asked that great Shakespearean actor Sir Donald Wolfit why it was, when he played King Lear, he didn't speak bits of Hamlet.

'Madam,' Wolfit said, 'If you're invited to play golf you don't take your tennis racket.' Similarly, the writing of plays and the writing of screenplays are two different games. I believe plays engage my imagination and inner being most intensely because what I create arises out of who I am in the most profound sense. It springs from me, belongs to me and to no-one else.

I'm given to expressing ideas and emotions through language, in the hope of exciting the audience's imagination. It is of course one of the main differences between the theatre and the cinema. As I've often said before, in the theatre it's no accident that the place where you sit is called an auditorium which means precisely 'a place where you listen.'

Language is the key to the theatre. In the cinema, however, the eye is dominant and you are obliged to look, to view gigantic images projected onto an enormous screen – or used to be projected onto an enormous screen, now the screens are getting smaller and smaller and cinematic quality and perhaps impact are inevitably lost.

Nevertheless I had to learn to bring the same commitment to the writing of screenplays. A subject for a screenplay has to invade my inner world and take up residence. The writer must know the world he is writing about. Some writers would be enviably versatile and have an apparently limitless range.

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Others, like me, will have a narrower field of vision. In either case, the writer must know with certainty that he can explore and develop the terrain in hand and especially the characters that inhabit that terrain. And those of us who adapt other people's work must, I believe, act as guardians of what we have divined to be the heart of the source material.

Because the book, the play or the biography is not the film. It is the source material. You dare not be too reverent or too faithful. All you can do is try your damndest to preserve the spirit of the original work, sometimes in the face of vicious assaults from the director, the producer, the star actor and worst of all, the sales people. So when it came to writing for the screen I began with adaptations, and adaptations of novels, biographies and plays is what I mostly do.

Now I'm going to say something which many of you may think of as an attempt to put a large number of people out of work, and to deter the young from pursuing careers as screenwriters – and it's this: I'm not absolutely certain that screenwriting can be taught, but I am absolutely certain that it can be learnt.

When, on the rare occasions I've taken part in Q&As at film schools, certain buzzwords and phrases fly around like wasps looking for someone to sting.

Character arcs, storylines, plot development and – most curious of all – the division of a screenplay into three acts. This seems to me so out of date and ridiculous because the three act construction owes its origins to the early 20th century theatre and was largely abandoned in the 1960s.

Now plays are divided, rather successfully, into two acts. But that seems to be ignored. Why three acts? Why not five, as in the classical and Shakespearean traditions? Whichever way the arbitrary division in movies, it's an attempt to imitate in abstract formula what is thought to lie at the heart of some successful films, in the hope that the formula for success can be repeated.

Believe me, there is no formula, and that way of thinking is to my mind lazy and artificial and robs the screenplay of originality, drive and vitality. So, to my learning process, there are two questions

concerning the purpose of the screenplay and the answers have to be learnt and never taken for granted.

The first question is: What is a screenplay for? The second is to ask: What does a screenplay do? I'm going to deal with asking what a screenplay is for. It may seem simplistic and self evident when I say that a screenplay is a technical document that has to supply the necessary information to every department concerned with the making of the film.

Concealed in that answer are countless pitfalls in the writing of the document, into which I—and I suspect many others—have plunged. The first trap is the format of the screenplay, which as a matter of fact I found rather easy to learn, I discovered it can be done in less than an hour.

In my own case I bought the Penguin edition of Tennessee Williams's *Baby Doll*, which is a brilliant piece of work. But I was horrified by the way the document was set out. The screenplay is the clumsiest, ugliest document known to man. With numbered scene headings, esoteric abbreviations like 'POV', 'CS' and 'ESC', and those instructions 'Fade In', 'Fade out', 'Cut to', 'dissolve.'

Just in passing, a few years ago when working with Roman Polanski on *Oliver Twist*, we had to make cuts to accommodate our limited budget. I decided that we could lose our original beginning and start later in the story. I presented my new version to Polanski who suddenly looked up from the first page and asked me, as if he'd never seen it before, 'Fade In – what does that mean, Fade In?'

I have to admit I was stumped, so I said I didn't know. 'Cut it out, it's meaningless,' and so it is. It's a convention, a meaningless convention. And in all my screenplays since I don't put 'Fade In' or 'Fade Out' and never will again.

Besides the filmmakers, the screenplay has also to be read by those people who, it is hoped, will invest money in the making of the film. We're inclined to disparage the investors, casting them as dyslexic, stupid or simply illiterate.

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While they may be one or all of those things, the reality has to be faced that these men and women hold a skeleton key to moviemaking, and they have to read the script and be tempted to gamble vast sums in order that the film can reach the screen.

Now how is all this to be learnt, or more to the point, how did I come to learn these things? I've discovered even now, after nearly 50 years, that there are two ways in which this unending process of learning can be achieved. The first is to sit down and write. The actual act of writing is to the writer what exercise is to the athlete.

And it is, in my view, the best way to learn. Practice, trial and error, the self discipline of starting work at the same time every day, has been very much part of my learning process. And it is in writing that I discover the life of the characters and hope to experience that exciting moment when I'm taken by surprise by what one of them may say or do.

I never plan ahead; I let the story unfold as I write. Almost every morning of my professional life I've sat down at my desk and written. For reasons I can't explain I've never experienced writer's block, unlike JD Salinger the author of *Catcher In The Rye*, who wrote hardly anything after 1965 until his death earlier this year.

He is, I suppose, the most famous example of writer's block. The story goes that, so desperate was he to overcome this dreadful impediment, that he attended a lecture in New York to be given by Somerset Maugham, one of the world's most prolific authors of the 20th century.

After the lecture, Maugham took questions from the audience and was asked if he'd ever experienced writer's block. He said that he hadn't because his method was to sit at his desk every morning and if he had no ideas in his head he would simply write, 'I am Somerset Maugham, I am Somerset Maugham, I am Somerset Maugham,' and an idea would inevitably flow.

Salinger was greatly impressed and said to a friend that he'd go home and try it. A few weeks later the friend asked him how he'd got on, and Salinger said it hadn't worked: 'I sat at my desk

and wrote 'I am Somerset Maugham, I am Somerset Maugham,' and nothing happened!'

My generation of playwrights began, for the most part, on television. [As] extraordinary as it may now seem there were three weekly slots for the one off, hour long television play provided by the BBC and the independent television companies ATV and ABC. In those days television drama owed its allegiance to the theatre.

We were allowed to write moderately long dialogue scenes, and were obliged to contain the action in as few sets or locations as possible. In the beginning the transmissions went out live. It was all rather exciting, not to say hair-raising, very like the first night of a play in the theatre.

My first two television plays were made into black and white films, both directed by the late Caspar Wrede. I wrote the screenplays, or what passed for screenplays, because they were really little more than expanded television scripts.

The first of them, *The Barber Of Stamford Hill*, ran as a film for little over an hour – not much longer than the original play. To give you some idea of what it was like, at the end of the first week of shooting, the prop man sidled up to me and said, 'Here Ron, when does this film break into a gallop?'

The second was called *Private Potter*, and the title role was played by a young actor who was just beginning to burst onto the scene. His name was Tom Courtenay, and it was largely his spectacular performance and his growing fame that was responsible for MGM financing the movie which we expanded by half an hour by adding a sub plot – I don't think altogether successfully.

Nevertheless, I learnt a little but not much from transferring the TV play to the big screen, the editing process and from watching the finished project. My entry into the film industry proper came about as a result of these two initial baptisms of fire. The second learning process was about to begin.

The story editor of 20th Century Fox, John Burke, had been assigned to write a novel of *Private Potter*, which I turned down because I thought I was too grand to do such things. It was he who

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suggested to his masters that I be employed to write the screenplay of *A High Wind In Jamaica* by Richard Hughes.

The director was to be Alexander Mackendrick, and it is the director – I discovered – who has provided for me over the years, the second strand of the learning process. And it began with Mackendrick, who proved to be immensely important to me.

Mackendrick was renowned for some splendid movies, including *Whisky Galore*, *The Man In The White Suit* and what I considered to be his two masterpieces, *The Ladykillers* and *Sweet Smell of Success*.

He was in his mid-50s when we worked together, a man who did not communicate easily, which made his dealings with actors particularly anguished. He was a trained artist and had begun his professional life as an art director for the advertising firm of J. Walter Thompson.

When to tell me what he envisaged in a scene became too arduous for him he would sketch what he wanted and ask me to describe it in the script. It was a brilliant exercise in learning how to express in words the visual world of the picture. And that led to learning about economy of language.

The novel by Richard Hughes, after introducing Jamaica and the Thornton family, goes on to a description of the storm, the rising of the high wind, which is how I wanted to begin the movie. So I described the gathering of the storm, the trees bending, the sand stirring, the distress of the sea. It ran to about two or three pages.

Mackendrick read it and asked – as directors seem to do when they're dealing with me – 'What's this?' I told him, it was a description of the impending storm. He said, 'Cut it, just put the wind rises and I'll do the rest.'

The lesson is almost self evident: I learnt from Mackendrick that there's no point in being too detailed for countless reasons, an obvious one is that the screenwriter being the first in line will not have had access to the set designs or the exact locations. So no amount of waffle or padding, or even detail would be of any use.

And the corollary is to understand that there is no need to demonstrate that one can write a beautiful sentence. The screenplay is not literature, but the demands are nevertheless severe. I work hard to make the language I use grammatical, clear and above all precise – especially when describing action.

And there is of course another form of economy which I've found prudent to pursue, but perhaps it's better described as thrift. I never throw anything away, not a word, not a sentence, not a line of dialogue.

I'm like one of those compulsive people who saves everything because it may one day be of use. And it very often is. Mackendrick also gave me my first lesson in construction – no, not the three act variety, but a way of thinking in visual sequences.

It was he who introduced me to the postcard system, which he himself had learned in Hollywood, now commonplace and provided for in most screenwriting computer programmes. We wrote out on postcards a sequence of scenes and played around with them as the editor might in the cutting process.

Sequence after sequence with the cards littered all over the floor of my study. In those days it was thought essential to know exactly where a scene was taking place. In other words, you couldn't go from one interior to another, but had to establish the exterior of a building before entering – a rule some television dramas still seem to follow.

So these cards were an aid to constructing, not the storyline, but the visual line. And it's a method I still sometimes employ, although I now find it a little less necessary and even a little restricting, preferring to keep the visual flow in my mind.

There was something else, a trick that Mackendrick passed on to me. If a scene, say between two people, wasn't working because it lacked tension, drama or suspense, he advised putting in a character who shouldn't be there.

If dealing, say, with a husband and wife add the husband's mistress or the wife's lover and see what happens. Curiously, Terence Rattigan told me he did the same thing and was astonished

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and a little disappointed when I said I'd already learnt it from Mackendrick.

The film industry did for Sandy Mackendrick. He was temperamentally unsuited to the cut and thrust and pitching and deal making, but he was a great teacher and ended up Dean of the film school of the California Institute of Arts. I've met many of his former students in the passing years and all revered him. None, as I remember, were screenwriters, but then he didn't – as far as I know – teach screenplays as such, he taught film which is an entirely different matter.

I have found that every director of quality has something to impart. For lack of time I cannot enumerate now in detail what I gleaned from each other them. But Lewis Gilbert, Peter Yates, Istvan Szabo, Roman Polanski, Norman Jewison, Baz Luhrmann and others, all have taught me something valuable.

And of course there are those who have taught me what not to do, but this is not the moment to remember them.

So I now come to the other, and perhaps the most important question of all: What is a screenplay supposed to do? E.M. Forster, the author of *A Passage To India* among other many splendid books, was once asked the same question about the novel.

He thought for a moment, and answered somewhat regretfully, 'What does a novel do? Dear oh dear, well a novel tells a story.' And so, of course, does a screenplay. In fact all art tells a story, even abstract art. It may be difficult or impossible to discern, but that's what art does, it tells a story satisfying an ancient, deep seated need in the human psyche, and the screenplay is no exception.

And telling the story is the most difficult aspect of screenwriting. For my own part my approach to screenplays is to tell the story as clearly and as interestingly as possible, remembering always Francois Truffaut's confession; 'All my films,' he said, 'have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.'

'I'm a little on guard about over constructing a story, flashing back and flashing forward, of

glimpsing memory and short, sharp cuts or asking for a split screen every now and then – we all know the sort of thing.

I sometimes think that unfolding the events in that way is a symptom of the filmmaker's lack of confidence in the story he or she is supposed to be telling. Or perhaps it's simply an admission that there isn't any story to tell. Or it may even be a cry of, 'Look Mummy, I'm a filmmaker!'

Beginnings are, to me, vital in the process of writing. I like all stories, whether novels or plays or films, to begin with 'a shot rang out,' however that is to be expressed. My ideal is Graham Greene, as you will remember his first sentence of *Brighton Rock* is masterly. 'Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him.' Perfect.

And Greene admitted to aborting several novels because he had got the beginning wrong, and so have I. Several novels, countless plays and screenplays, in which I've sounded the wrong opening note and have had to work hard until I believed I'd got it right. And many times I didn't.

Let me give you an example of what I believe to be a superb opening sequence in a movie, *All The President's Men*, screenplay by William Goldman.

(Clip from *All The President's Men*)

Why I think that clip is so excellent, because that opening shot of the typewriter – I think it was an IBM golf ball typewriter – the sound and the letters that size, not only because it's an intriguing visual image but also because that image of the typewriter at work encapsulates the heart of the story, which is set in a newspaper office, where typewriters and copy play a central part.

Typewriters in the film are an almost constant accompaniment to the action, and all of that is set up in that simple opening. And also it tells you effortlessly when it was taking place, and what is to be the pulse of the story, the President of the United States – in this case Richard M. Nixon. You are sucked in to the world of Washington D.C.

Let me now turn to my own experience with beginnings, with *The Diving Bell & The Butterfly* in particular. It's the story of Jean-Dominique Bauby,

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the editor of Elle magazine, who suffered a massive stroke which left him with what is called locked-in syndrome, able to blink only one eye.

Because his physiotherapist developed a system of saying the alphabet to him, the most frequently used letters first, he found it possible to blink after the appropriate letter and so compose a word, a sentence and finally an entire book on which I was to base the screenplay.

My wife had read the book four or five years before I was offered the film. She urged me to read it, which I did and found it moving and inspiring. It never occurred to me that it could be a film.

When the producer, Kathleen Kennedy – she's produced among other things *ET*, *Jurassic Park* and *Indiana Jones* and is unquestionably one of the best producers I have worked for – when she called me to ask if I would write the screenplay I did an insanely dangerous thing.

I said yes immediately, without re-reading the book. The deal was done, the money paid, I set off for France where the action is set. I opened the book, read a page and thought, 'Oh my God, what have I let myself in for?' I had no idea how to proceed. I certainly had no idea how to begin.

For three weeks I pretended to do research – always a good way of avoiding the issue. I met some of the people involved in the story, made notes and took sleeping pills. Finally I decided to call Kathy Kennedy and tell her I couldn't write it and that I would have to give back the money.

Now nothing concentrates the mind of a writer more wonderfully than the thought of having to give back the money. This is absolutely true, just as I was about to lift the telephone to make the call, there came into my head that the whole thing should be told from hero's point of view.

The camera would be Jean-Dominique Bauby. The camera would do the blinking, and you'd only ever see him in mirrors, in reflections and of course in flashbacks. And that set me off. This is what I wrote in the first draft, in fact the only draft. I was never asked to change a word. The first time, and only time that's ever happened to me.

"INTERIOR: Jean-Do's room, Naval Hospital, day. Blackness; silence; the blackness slowly, very slowly, begins to lighten. As if at a distance the sound of two voices, a man and a woman chatting, little more than intermittent murmurs. Then suddenly close, a female voice: 'Look, he's waking.' A male voice: 'Page Dr Cocheton, quickly.'

"Almost immediately, the female voice: 'Dr Cocheton, come to Room 119 please, Dr Cocheton to Room 119 please!'. A sudden flash, the faces of two nurses, one male, the other female. Then, just as suddenly, blackness again.

"The male voice: 'No, no Jean-Dominique, open your eyes,'. Like a flickering eyelid, a picture begins to take shape. A small, bare hospital room, the faces of the nurses either side of the bed, both looking down expectantly, directly into camera,'.

"The camera is Jean-Dominique Bauby, known as Jean-Do. As his eyes open he sees first, the foot of his bed, then curled, paralysed hands on the yellow sheets, the IV pole hanging over him and two nurses smiling, leaning towards him."

Now this is how the director, Julian Schnabel, brought that to the screen.

(Clip from *The Diving Bell And The Butterfly*)

After writing that beginning, I didn't read all of it, I don't want you to think that was the director's work, it largely was my work. I do want to take credit here, my ego needs encouraging. After writing that, the screenplay more or less wrote itself, more or less.

When I'd finished, and before I delivered the draft to Kathy Kennedy, I was afflicted by profound misgivings. Were there other films, I wondered, where the principal character was – as it were – played by the camera. If so, how many and what were they?

Now it's always been my belief that every screenwriter is the sum total of every film he has ever seen, just as every writer is the sum total of everything he has ever read. And then I remembered something dimly. When I was 13 or 14, in other words a very long time ago, I saw a film called *The Lady In The Lake*, screenplay by

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Steve Fisher, based on Raymond Chandler's novel.

The director was also the star, Robert Montgomery, playing Phillip Marlowe. The film must have nestled in my subconscious, lying dormant for more than 50 years. I remember being profoundly impressed at the time by what I believed was its originality.

The camera was Phillip Marlowe, who you sometimes glimpsed in mirrors or reflections. The film was badly received in its day, but I knew that it had somehow surfaced when I was struggling to find an approach to *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. Here is a scene from that movie, leading to a car chase.

(Clip from *The Lady In The Lake*)

I only recently saw that film again and, despite the defects of pace and stylised performances, the experience was absolutely gripping and fascinating. I've never before publicly acknowledged my debt to Robert Montgomery and Steve Fisher, but on behalf of my subconscious I do so this evening.

I want now to recount my experience of writing *The Pianist*, because I believe the event illustrates much of what I've been talking about tonight – namely, the learning process.

The offer to write the screenplay did not, it seems, come out by accident but because of a thematic connection which I and others have detected exists in my work, both for the theatre and for the films. An obsession with the events leading up to the Second World War, the Holocaust and its aftermath.

As EM Forster said, 'Only connect.' In 2000 Roman Polanski saw the excellent Paris production of a play of mine called *Taking Sides*, which is about the de-Nazification of the great German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler.

Since the play is about music and the Nazis, Polanski thought I might be the man to write the screenplay of *The Pianist*. I've subsequently accused him of having no imagination whatsoever. He sent me the book, which I read in

one sitting, I telephoned him and said yes, I may even have said, 'Yes please.'

The Pianist is an autobiographical work in which Wladyslaw Szpilman describes his survival as a Polish Jew in Warsaw during the Second World War. It is told without sentimentality, indeed without much comment, as if he's describing someone else's suffering.

There is another element in Szpilman's book that spoke directly to me, and that was the appearance near the end of a German officer, Captain Wilm Hosenfeld who saved Szpilman's life. His actions sounded a note of reconciliation, and I've always been a sucker for the possibility of redemption in this world which was one of the reasons why I responded so quickly and so positively.

Polanski and I met in Paris, where he lives, and to my astonishment, in no time at all, in the course of that first meeting in fact, discovered that we agreed on the form and the content of the film. I also discovered in the course of that conversation that he too kept his distance from the past.

And when he recounted some of his memories of the Krakow ghetto, which he'd survived, it was as an observer and not a participant. And that accorded precisely with Szpilman's own amazing objectivity.

A few days later he decided we should go to Warsaw, mainly because he wanted us to look at sickening archive footage shot by the Nazis, and to inspect the place where the Jews had been walled in and then sent to their annihilation.

On three successive days we sat in a viewing theatre to watch the grainy, black and white record of the brutal destruction of Warsaw's Jews, most of it never shown to the public at large. They were a deeply depressing few days. Looking back, I suspect the archive footage was of more value to Polanski than to me, because when he and the production designer Allan Starski, came to reproduce the ghetto they were able to do so with ruthless accuracy.

I returned to London and began the writing of the screenplay. No, that's not strictly accurate. So now I come back to beginnings. I found I didn't

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know how to begin, my usual problem. Polanski would call me from Ibiza, he had a house there (that's how directors live you know, while writers write).

He would call me from time to time to ask how I was getting on. I lied. I said it was going swimmingly. But at last I was forced to confess the truth, 'I don't know how to begin,' I said. Polanski exploded: 'For God's sake,' he cried, 'the book's called *The Pianist*, start with him playing the piano!' Which is what I did.

And from that moment the screenplay began its journey. I was determined to preserve the author's approach as observer, but with Polanski's agreement I was also determined not to use a voiceover, not to have Szpilman as narrator.

This of course presented problems, Szpilman is alone for much of the story, he has no-one to confide in, so the emotional content had to emerge from the action with any overt or covert help from us.

My main task was to turn Szpilman and his family into characters who lived and breathed. In the book they're more or less symbolic figures: mother, father, sisters, brother. So I delved into the book in great detail, trying to discern clues to these people in the hope that I would not create stereotypes.

And it's odd that Szpilman is much more forthcoming about many of the other characters he describes. It was as if he'd been reticent about his own family because the memory of them was too painful. As was often the way I had to dredge my memories of my own Jewish family in the hope that the characters would spring to life.

In due course I delivered the screenplay. Polanski made very encouraging noises, but added – rather ominously, I thought – 'Now we lock ourselves up until we are totally happy.' To do this we repaired to a house near Rambouillet, south west of Paris where for four weeks we worked every day, from 10 until 6.

We began, at Polanski's insistence, on the end of the film. Not the concert with which he was

completely satisfied and never questioned, but with the scenes concerning the German officer.

He didn't want many changes, but that's where we began and it's because I think what Polanski was doing was finding a way for his imagination to enter fully into the story so that we could always keep in mind our final objective.

We'd act out scenes aloud – we're both terrific actors – and when he wasn't sure I understood exactly what he wanted he'd draw the location or the prop or the camera angle. Like Mackendrick he's a gifted artist so his sketches were enormously helpful.

When a problem arose and I'd make a suggestion that wasn't to his liking he'd react as though I'd insulted his wife. 'You crazy! That's terrible,' he'd cry, 'let's have a coffee.' And when I suggested something of which he did approve he would be equally extreme, 'That's great, my God, that's great. Let's have a coffee.'

We drank a lot of coffee. In retrospect, I see now that we were not simply finalising a technical document. We were doing that, making it as precise as possible, but trying to ensure that there was no falsehood or bogus emotion in our account Szpilman's story.

You would be hard pressed to find two less sentimental men than Polanski and me, and any hint of it we both instantly recognised and excised. Polanski did occasionally call his own memories in for details and incidents. There was one in particular. I had accurately copied the moment in the book where a Jewish policeman saves Szpilman from boarding a cattle truck bound for Treblinka.

Szpilman describes himself running from the scene. 'No,' Polanski said, 'I'll tell you what happened to me, it will be better.' Apparently he too was saved in a similar manner, but when he'd been pushed out of the ghetto, under the barbed wire, and started to run his saviour hissed, 'Walk, don't run.'

And so we changed it. In the film Szpilman walks slowly towards the gate while the Germans herd his family and all the others into trucks. I knew it was a reality I personally could not have invented.

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Despite the subject matter we laughed a lot, making dreadful jokes in bad taste about Jews, Poles and Germans. It was the only way to get through the harrowing material, I think. A month to the day later we finished. Once back in Paris he presented me with a gift, an Espresso coffee machine.

There were no further changes to the screenplay. I remember that the producer questioned the concert at the very end of the movie, where Szpilman plays a piano concerto with full orchestra. He said, 'That concert, it will be expensive.' Polanski said, 'Yes, it will be expensive,' and that was that. Polanski allowed no interference from anyone.

As a matter of fact, if an actor wanted to change a line Polanski would call me from the location or the studio floor and ask my opinion. Inevitably I said my line was better and in every case Polanski agreed and refused the change. So I repeat; the source material is not the film.

And a painfully difficult lesson to learn, the screenplay is not the film either. The screenplay is to the movie what an architect's blueprint is to the building. This is why I abhor those scripts which are written in an attempt to seem like a post-production document, a sort of comic strip approach, in the hope that the reader will imagine the film more easily.

It's a form of confidence trick. It's also why I avoid camera directions like the plague. I do so because I know, if I were to write in say 'a close up' you can be sure it will end up as a long shot. There's no point in telling the director how to shoot his film. He will have his own ideas, which will override the screenwriter's.

He will also have the advantage of having studied the set designs, and of having chosen the locations. I have a further confession to make. I am not very au fait with technical terms or indeed the mechanics of filmmaking. I don't know a dolly from a crane.

So I try to tell what's happening in any given scene simply by setting out the action and supplying the dialogue in the hope that the reader will know exactly what's intended. And I

stick rigidly to describing only what can be realised on the screen.

I never say for example what a character's thinking, or feeling, unless it is absolutely clear from either the action or the dialogue. I never suggest music to accompany a scene or sequence, and by being as economical as possible I'm simply trying my utmost to make the screenplay readable.

A final illustration: you will remember my difficulty to find a beginning for *The Pianist*, and you will remember Polanski telling me to start with Szpilman playing the piano. That's how I wrote it, but this is how the film began.

(Clip from *The Pianist*)

APPLAUSE

Polanski called me from the cutting room to say he was adding that archive footage at the beginning. I was rather doubtful of course and I said 'must you?' and he said 'yes, I must,'. It was added during the editing process, and I think it's masterly because it establishes a tranquil, elegant past soon to be shattered.

I have to keep telling myself, reminding myself, that the Golden Rule of screenwriting is there is no Golden Rule. I wish there were. Each time I start on a screenplay it's as if I've never written one before. I hold in my mind that form is of secondary importance to content. What a film is about stands above all else.

In an ideal world the screenplay, besides supplying all the information that it needs to supply, must be enjoyable to read. And finally the director should shoot the film laid down in that document, and no other. I talk, of course, of an ideal world."

Q&A

Tanya Seghatchian (Host): Sir Ronald that was brilliant, informative, entertaining. I wish I were in your ideal world with you...

RH: Come, it's not exclusive.

TS: What are you working on now?

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RH: Nothing. I've written a short play, which I won't go into until the announcement's made. I've got a new play for next year, I'm hoping Dustin Hoffman is going to direct a screenplay of a play of mine called *Quartet*.

I don't think they've got the money yet, I don't know what's going on. But no-one tells me, I'm the writer.

TS: And in that illustrious list of directors that you have worked with, is there anyone who you still want to work with who you haven't had the chance to work with?

RH: Do you know, I don't think like that. It depends what the subject matter is not who the director is. I'm not really interested whether the director is the flavour of the month, or whatever. What does he come to me with? Do I think I can do it? That's really the answer. Does it belong to me?

So I don't think about directors. There was one director who was certainly the most generous I ever worked with; Peter Yates, who directed *The Dresser*. On the day we were launching it in Hollywood he drove me down Sunset Boulevard, and on the big poster it said 'A Film By Peter Yates and Ronald Harwood'.

It's the only time that's ever happened, so don't get over excited. But that was the most generous offer, and he was wonderful to work with but we never worked together again although we stayed close friends.

TS: Was it an easier experience working with Roman Polanski again on *Oliver Twist*, because of the shorthand you had between you?

RH: Exactly, and it was a much easier thing to adapt. We made some decisions at the beginning, I can't remember the process now, it was so quick. We did it very easily, we didn't lock ourselves up anywhere but I have a flat in Paris so that was very convenient. I used to take a cab across to him, and we'd act out scenes.

He was a wonderful Fagin, a wonderful Fagin. And we laughed, we do get on very well, I'm hoping to see him in a couple of weeks when I go

to Paris, and I hope we'll work together again but that depends how the world is.

TS: I have to honestly confess that both *The Pianist* and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* are amongst my favourite films. I was given the manuscript of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, and I read it and I thought it was brilliant, and I thought it was absolutely inconceivable that it could ever be turned into a film.

RH: It is. It's as if somebody else has done it. It doesn't feel as if I've done it. I was very cross with Kathy Kennedy; she accepted something on my behalf in Hollywood and she said she would never offer me *Jurassic Park 3*, and I was really upset. It robbed me of a huge income, that. But there you go.

TS: And you wrote it in one draft?

RH: I know, but that's never happened before either. There was a curious set of circumstances. I delivered it to Kathy, who's a wonderful, wonderful producer and person. I think she had a deal with Universal Pictures and they all jumped up and down and said, 'If only we could get Johnny Depp.'

You have to remember that casting is done only on the most popular actor or actress of that day. Not of the year, not of the week, not of all time, of that day. And sometimes, at 12 noon. And Johnny Depp was it. Johnny Depp read it and said it was the greatest screenplay he'd ever read and he'd like his friend Julian Schnabel to direct it.

Universal took Julian Schnabel on board. Then I didn't hear anything for some time. Johnny Depp came to London to launch *Finding Neverland*. We were invited to the premiere and we were put 12 miles away and he was in the centre. At the end of the meal somebody came across and said he'd like to meet me.

So we went across, and he said, 'That is the greatest script I have ever read.' I turned to my wife and said, 'He's not going to do the movie.' I've been around actors for 50 years, I know the game.

And I was right, he went off and did the three *Pirates* pictures. And so the film lay fallow. I

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thought it was a hell of a shame, I was very proud of the screenplay in a way that I hadn't been of others, but I was proud of that. And then Kathy phoned and said Pathé, the French company, would do it, but in French, with subtitles. Was that alright?

If I'd said no it wouldn't have mattered, but I thought it was a lovely idea. It limited its commercial exploitation, but nevertheless that's what we did and that's how the film was made. We were so lucky, that was through Kathy's work with Spielberg.

The lighting cameraman was Janusz Kaminski, who's one of the great cameramen. It's marvellously shot, and very quickly. It wasn't a huge budget, so that was how that came about.

TS: But this thing about language now, and the commerciality of language, and the subject is quite an interesting one. Does one now tell a European story in the language of the characters that the story is about? You made those choices with *The Pianist*, which are interesting choices about language.

RH: What we did with *The Pianist*, we took a decision that English was Polish. So when the Germans speak in the film they speak in German and it's subtitled. And you can do that, but I think if you're going to have foreign elements in an English story or an American story they should speak in their own language.

I don't think people accept people saying, 'Zis is not good,' I don't think that goes any more, or Alec Guinness playing an Indian in *A Passage To India*. I don't think that works, so you have to go for the reality. We did that in *The Pianist*, I think. Nobody complained.

And in *The Diving Bell* what was very nice, because Americans were very resistant to subtitles. That's not because they can't read, don't get me wrong, just because they have a resistance to it.

But when we were there doing the launch and all that, many people I asked as they went out, I said 'Were the subtitles troublesome?' and they said, 'Oh God, it had subtitles?' They hadn't noticed,

and that's something to do with the story I think, it's a very gripping story.

TS: And also being able to communicate by reading when you cannot communicate in any other way is something which...

RH: I tried to blink, I had somebody read to me and I couldn't blink a word because if the word started with T, or V, or W, you had to wait all that time. What he did was work for two or three hours every morning with the physio, and then had to sleep because he was exhausted.

And in that period he thought of what he was going to write the next day in great detail. I think the lady who took it down, who took the diction, guessed a lot of it. I mean, it just seems impossible to do that but there it is, it's an extraordinary document.

TS: With both of those films one of the things that fascinates me most is the extent to which they are absolutely pieces of cinema, and you've always declared that your natural home and your first love in terms of original ideas is the theatre. But it's inconceivable that either of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* or *The Pianist* could have been done in any other form.

RH: Absolutely. I would love to have longer dialogue scenes, but it's because of the commercial. Ridley Scott, who produced a film I wrote, *The Browning Version*, I tried to get longer scenes in. Ridley was going to direct it to begin with and then it was handed over to Mike Figgis who did a lovely, lovely job.

Ridley was insistent on short scenes and cuts, and that's to do with his commercial background. He said to me that he thought the commercial was to the movie what the short story was to the novel. I totally disagree, but Ridley knows more about it than I do for sure.

I sometimes would love to be able to expand a little bit. I think we are inclined to dismiss the audience, that they won't be able to concentrate for that long, that their concentration span is very short they say now. And maybe it is but I think one could give it a whirl. But you need courage and a director or producer who will go with that.

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TS: Is the director your fundamental collaborator?

RH: Oh without doubt, it's his film in a sense. There's no good disguising it. I do hate the way they take possession, and I think Jeremy's talked about this, last night on television. What I call the apostrophe 's' syndrome. Steven Spielberg's Hamlet. Not Shakespeare's. Or Roman Polanski's King Lear, whatever it might be.

There's something about that possession which totally undermines how a film is made. A film is a collaborative effort. It's true the director has to control and has to direct, but that he should then want to impose everything of his ego on it seems to me monstrous. And if I was 20 years younger I'd have a go at fighting them, but it's too late now, I can't be bothered.

I'm very well paid, I have a lovely life, I have a privileged life, I write what I like, if things come my way and I want to do them I do them. So to hell with the ego, but it's to do with one's own ego as well of course, one's squashed and flattened out.

With *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* my agent in America, who's called Jeff Berg and is the head of ICM, he called me and said, 'Ronnie, you're going to have get a publicist.' I thought publicists were very vulgar things, British people don't have publicists, I thought.

He said [it was because] 'Julian Schnabel is airbrushing you out of the movie.' He was claiming that the idea for the point of view was his. So I did it, I got a publicist, and it was corrected, but it needed correcting because the director becomes monstrously self important and forgets the other collaborators.

We did a Q&A in Hollywood, Schnabel, Janusz Kaminski the cameraman and me. There were questions from the audience. Schnabel never mentioned Kathy Kennedy, who was the initiator, and he never mentioned Janusz Kaminski. He had to mention me because somebody asked me a question, otherwise he wouldn't have done.

When we came out I said to Janusz, 'He didn't even mention you,' and he said, 'No, but what did I do? I just pointed the camera, I swept the

floor.' Mind you he's won two Oscars so his ego seems to be in place.

TS: Does winning an Oscar or a BAFTA make a difference?

RH: Of course, I won my Oscar when I was 68 years old, I thought my life was over but it was actually only just beginning. It's been the most remarkable thing, elevation, it draws attention to you, work came in and I think it did for Adrien Brody. Three of us won, Roman, Adrien and me.

Oh of course, it was wonderful. It's no good being blasé about it and saying, 'Oscars! I don't go to ceremonies.' I've been to three of them now, it's better to win than not to win, that's all I can say.

TS: You were 46 when you wrote *The Dresser*.

RH: I thought my career was over then too. I always think that. I think it's over now actually. All my contemporaries were world famous playwrights, Pinter, Stoppard. Pinter and I were actors together in 1953 in the Wolfit company. He was one of the great playwrights of the 20th century.

It was intimidating; they were all up there and doing well, Arnold Wesker, John Osborne, and I was alright but I knew I hadn't fulfilled anything in myself. And then I wrote *The Dresser* as a play of course, and the day I was to deliver it to my agent I went to The Garrick Club, of which I'm a member.

And as I was going in John Gielgud was coming out, and he said, 'Oh, what have you been up to?' I said, 'Well John, I've just written a new play about an English actor-manager, and his dresser.' And Gielgud said, 'Aah, backstage plays never do well.'

I went into lunch absolutely crushed. So when I delivered it to my agent, Judy Daish, I said, 'This won't do anything, John Gielgud says backstage plays never do.' She read it and said, 'I don't know.' I said, 'Judy, John Gielgud knows more than you.'

It was done in Manchester and I think from the first night to now as we sit here I don't think a night

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has passed when it hasn't been performed somewhere in the world. Which is lovely.

TS: When you come back to something that you wrote in one form like *The Dresser*, are you coming back to it as a screenplay with a different hat on? Are you re-imagining it?

RH: You have to abandon the play. We didn't entirely. There are two stories I'd like to tell you about this. Billy Wilder sent for me to do something which never happened. He said to me: '*The Dresser*, that's a terrible film, all that talk, talk, it's terrible. I should know, I've seen it six times!'

When it first burst on the scene, and opened at the Queen's Theatre in London, I was sent for by Lew Grade, for whom I'd worked. I'd been under contract to ATV as a television playwright.

And Lew said, 'Ah yes, I haven't seen the play but we can certainly get a film made of it, they tell me it's terrific. We can get you anybody, we can get you Beryl Streeep, anybody.' That's true, absolutely true.

This was about seven o'clock in the morning and he wanted to see us, Judy and me, and he offered me a cigar which I took. I like cigars, but seven o'clock in the morning is a bit early. They were that long, and his was that long, so they met across his desk.

Anyway, I never heard from him again. There were other offers and things, but nothing. I went to Rome to see the Italian production and premiere, and a man came up to me and said, 'I'm head of 20th Century Fox Europe, I like that play, I want to buy it for 20th Century Fox.'

I said, '20th Century Fox have already turned it down.' He said, 'Look, if I tell them that I want it...'. So I came back to London and he said, 'You're right, 20th Century Fox don't want it.' He said, 'I want you to meet Peter Yates, who loves the play and I think you'd get on well.'

We met, we had a dinner. We went upstairs to the attic of his house in Elm Park Gardens. Like a Mafia meeting, the women were left to talk down below and we went upstairs. Peter said, 'I'm still worried that it's still too much a play.' I said, 'Well there's one scene that I'd really love to add, an

apocryphal story about Wolfit coming onto a railway station during the war, as the train was pulling out, and saying, 'STOP THAT TRAIN!' in his full Lear voice, and the train stopping.

Peter said, 'We'll make the film,' and that's how it was. You just needed visual encouragement that the play could be abandoned, because you'll abandon the play but you keep all the long scenes.

Billy Wilder was, in a sense, right, there's a lot of talk. But I don't think I'd do it differently even today.

TS: Why had he seen it six times?

RH: Because he loved it.

From the audience: Can I ask a question? It's Tom Conti.

?: Tom Conti! Not Tom Courtenay [actor in *The Dresser*].

Conti: Why didn't you offer it to me?

RH: We did, you turned us down...actors are always waiting for television. No.

Conti: When you're writing dialogue do you read it aloud to yourself?

RH: I think I do. When my children were very young they used to hide under my study window, and I used to play the scenes out apparently. I didn't know I was doing it. When I realised they were there I'd make up scenes. 'I'm gonna cut you from your jaw to your stomach.' And I could hear them. I think I do.

But with Polanski, because we were both actors manqué we would read the scenes and that was lovely to do, to play them. But on the whole after a long time at it I kind of know when a line works or not.

Conti: As ever, listening to your stuff on the screen or reading it on the page it does feel as if you have actually tested the words in your mouth, because the dialogue is always good.

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RH: I think probably I do. I lose sense of myself when I'm writing, that's another thing. I smoke more cigarettes in the writing period than I smoke in a week in ordinary circumstances. My wife comes in with a coffee and she says, 'Look there are eight cigarettes that you haven't finished,' because I don't know where I am and that's a lovely, lovely feeling because time is smashed and I think the reality is smashed and you just go into the world that you're writing about. I think I can more or less tell if a line or a scene is going to work.

Conti: Yes, that's evident. Have you ever had a piece of work of yours, a story or a play, set for the screen by anyone else? And would you allow it?

RH: I haven't, on the whole I haven't. If somebody wants it they ask if I want to do it and usually I say yes because I need the money. And also because I want to protect the subject.

TS: Are there any other questions from the floor?

Question: How much of your African heritage informs your writing?

RH: It did years ago. The first novel I ever wrote was an anti apartheid novel in 1960 called *All The Same Shadows*. And I've done several films, I did a film about Mandela before anybody knew who Mandela was, when Mandela was still in prison. And I did *Cry, The Beloved Country*.

So it did inform....I've written other plays and things about it. But you know the South African cause wasn't fashionable when I was writing. Causes have fashions. Apartheid wasn't a fashionable cause. Vietnam was a fashionable cause.

When Vietnam finished people then turned their attention, those people who liked causes and were not busy with other things, turned their mind to South Africa. I'm rather cynical about all that.

Question: Sir Ronald, thank you for everything you've written, absolutely fantastic. I worked on *The Dresser* 25 plus years ago as a script supervisor and had the most amazing experience to work for two weeks in rehearsal with yourself and the wonderful Peter Yates and of course Albert Finney. I wondered if you wanted to talk a bit

about your process – you've talked about your process with directors – but how does it feel to come into rehearsal and the actor then wants to own the role and maybe change your words?

RH: Do you mean in films or in the theatre?

Questioner: I'm talking about in films specifically.

RH: What did you do on *The Dresser*?

Questioner: I was the script supervisor.

RH: Gosh, how lovely. Lovely that you're here. The actor has to own the part, but when an actor says 'I can't say this,' I always say 'you will when you're in character,' and they become furious. I'm really tough about that. Even in movies, if you have the director's protection, I don't like the lines being changed, as I told you, which Polanski was very, very mindful about.

But Polanski's background is also in the theatre, and so was Istvan Szabo and he didn't allow changes. Peter Yates didn't allow them. All three of them have their background in their theatre. You find with some directors who only know film that they're not absolutely au fait with the dynamics of a scene.

You know that as a script supervisor, you can tell when a director doesn't know the dynamics of the scene. Peter Yates did on *The Dresser*, and rehearsals were absolutely vital. They were enjoyable too, weren't they?

Questioner: They were just amazing, if I do get lung cancer it was because I had three cigars going solidly for three weeks. But I think what I was trying to get at was if there was a director who wasn't as powerful as somebody like Polanski or Peter Yates, when you have someone who is less experienced or gentler as a personality and you have an actor who's really powerful, like Albert Finney....

RH: It happened on my first film, *A High Wind In Jamaica*. Tony Quinn played the pirate captain, and he was brutal to Mackendrick. Mackendrick had a funny speech impediment, he used to snort and when he became embattled the snort became very bad. And Quinn, frankly, bullied him.

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I think Quinn owned a lot of the picture, 34 or 35% whatever it was. It broke Mackendrick, he certainly couldn't protect anything, but he was nevertheless a wonderful director. I've not worked with any directors who've given in. I think if somebody, a young director came in and there was a huge star involved, I think he'd be hard put to protect the screenplay.

But in the theatre the playwright is God, you can't change a line without the playwright's permission in the theatre. In the film world the director is God really.

TS: One of the recurring themes of this series, with screenwriters talking about screenplays, is the extent to which you have to lock it tight enough to control what happens but leave it loose enough to allow the director and the actor to bring to it what they can bring.

RH: Oh well certainly, I tried to say that in my lecture, that's why I put camera directions in because that's a lockdown and also it's going to be ignored anyway. The director will take room and if there isn't any he'll make room.

The actor, he just has to....I think it's the worst profession in the world, acting. It's terribly, terribly difficult. You have to be fit, you have to be imaginatively agile at 6.30 in the morning. Albert Finney used to say to me, he was doing a movie, I can't remember what it was but he used to say, 'I get to the studio at 5.30-6, they make me up, at 7 o'clock or 7.30 I have to get in bed with a girl and pretend I'm screwing her.'

'He said 'that's hard,'. I said 'it's nice work if you can get it Albert,'. But it is a very extraordinary life in films, and also in the theatre you have to do it every day, five, six, seven, eight times a week. The writer can't be a jailer in either form, so you've got to leave them room.

But I write a line and I will have thought about it for six or eight weeks and gone over it, I'm not a writer, I'm a re-writer. I know when it works. In answer to Tom's question, you just work it time after time, endlessly. Then an actor says he wouldn't say 'Hello' he'd say 'Hi'. No he bloody well wouldn't, he'll say 'Hello' and that's how it is!

Question: This isn't so much a question, but as you know I'm recovering from brain surgery. I'm doing alright, but it's a long, slow recovery. I just want to say with *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, I saw it thankfully after my surgery but the compassion, I wish that it were required viewing for neurologists, neurosurgeons, neuropsychologists, everyone in the field, because the compassion that you showed in this film for what this man was going through and the humanity of the man, that he was still who he was despite what was happening. You were able to convey that so beautifully.

RH: That's from the book. But you know that the butterfly is now the logo of the British stroke association. Not because of our film, but because of the book.

Questioner: I didn't know that, but thank you.

Question: Were you at all involved in the French translation of the screenplay for *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*? How did that feel for you?

RH: I was fortunate, I have a translator who does my plays into French, so I asked Kathy or Schnabel whether she could do the translation because I knew she's be true to the screenplay, which is what she did. But there's another problem with it, because when you have subtitles it has to fit into whatever the frames are, and that's a different art.

So, she [the translator, Dominique Hollier], did the translation and then there was an expert subtitler who made it fit the film. But even when Polanski did the German subtitles in *The Pianist* – I was with him at the time – he was very strict, I don't think he speaks German fluently but he was very strict about when they appear, how long they are.

He takes immense care, in the English version. And then in the foreign versions he was also very strict about the subtitles. It's a great art. So she translated from English into French, and then the French subtitler translated back into English. He used the text but it was a different process.

Question: Can you say a few words about your adaptation of Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan Denisovich*?

RH: God, how nice of you to ask about that. 1968. Sozhenitsyn was in Russia when he wrote it, and

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my wife's family is a Russian émigré family. The difference between her family and mine is they're émigrés and my family were immigrants. That tells you the whole story.

She had read it in Russian, I think, it was a Samizdat book on the underground and we got it. Caspar Wrede and I got hold of it. It wasn't published yet, and we had a special translation done and then we tried to get the film rights which were owned by the Soviet film people, the union people.

And they wouldn't let us have it. So we talked to his lawyer, I think it was a Swiss lawyer, who said, 'Look I don't want to know, just do it and if there's any money to be paid you can pay us afterwards.'

He was enormously wealthy, it must be remembered, because he had become a worldwide successful novelist. *Ivan Denisovich* is the story of one day in the life of a man in the Soviet gulag. The word gulag was not then known, it became known when he then wrote later books.

And the book is a work of genius because it describes a good day in his life. I think the last line, from memory, he had saved a piece of hacksaw, he'd got an extra piece of bread, another lump of sugar, he hadn't been taken ill and there were going to be 3,666 more days in his sentence. The extra days were for leap years.

It is a spectacular novel and we did it, I wrote the screenplay. Norsk Film, which is the Norwegian film company, put up money. And Westinghouse, who had a small film division, put up the rest of the money. And we shot it on the same latitude as Nome, Alaska. Freezing cold.

Sven Nykvist, also one of the great cameramen, shot the picture and he knew how to do it in that cold. You couldn't have oil in the camera, or any lubricant, because it would freeze up. We had doctors on the set, so that the actors kept their heads covered, it was an amazing experience.

The film came out in the same week as *A Clockwork Orange*. Now, you're all too young to remember but in the 60s the liberal left paid its allegiance to the Soviet Union, a horrendous society as bad as Nazi Germany but they

wouldn't pay any attention to what I said. So the film was rather disparaged and put into touch.

And of course *A Clockwork Orange* was a remarkable film by Kubrick, and it took all the kudos. So the film was ignored, largely. It has a remarkable performance, again by Tom Courtenay and it was beautifully directed. It is shot exquisitely.

The first shot is from a great, great height and you see what looks like a star in the firmament where the camera goes in and in and in and in and you slowly see it is a prison camp with the lights and the dogs, wonderful stuff.

Question: You spoke quite a lot about the challenge of finding the right beginnings, but could you share with us the process you go through creatively to find what would come to be the right endings?

RH: Well I hope that appears as I write the film, I don't plan it. Sometimes I have a vague idea where I want to be. It took me by surprise when Polanski wanted to start at the end, as he did with *The Pianist* and *Oliver Twist*. He was right about *Oliver Twist*, because I had cut out the scene where Oliver Twist visits Fagin in the prison.

I don't think it's in any adaptation except the one that Polanski and I did. I put it in and I knew as I was writing it that it was right, that Roman had been absolutely right about doing that. You have to take into yourself what you think the story is, what is it about. Don't send a message, but what is the resolution that's required?

I just let that happen, I don't think of it in advance, I hope to discover it as I write. And I'm sure most other writers...if you're writing a murder mystery you have to know who killed the guy. I've been trying to write my autobiography and I've given it up because I know how it ends, so you just have to do what you can do.

TS: Before we end tonight, if you don't mind waiting for one little moment before we thank....

RH: I'm dying for a cigarette.

TS: ...there's another person who we want to thank and then we'll come back and thank

Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

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

Sir Ronald Harwood CBE

23 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

Ronald. But if you wouldn't mind we would all like to thank Jeremy Brock for putting together this extraordinary series. And I'm sure Jeremy will join me and the rest of the audience in thanking Ronald for being so informative, entertaining and teaching us all the tips that the guy at customs thought he had done well with.

APPLAUSE