

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

Abi Morgan: I said to Jeremy I was absolutely cursing him this morning, as I was writing in my pyjamas, so forgive me if I'm a little nervous.

'I know one thing, that I know nothing': Socrates. I like this phrase. When I first heard it, it stuck with me. There is an expectation when asked to give a lecture that one will impart some wisdom. So the wisdom is this: I know one thing, that I know nothing.

As a writer I find this the only way to be. Whenever I start a project it is rarely the facts that have interested me, the stuff one knows about a character, a person, a situation, a story. When I'm pitching or having an idea pitched to me, I try to keep blank. It's because I'm waiting for why I should write this idea. Why I should spend the next two, three often more years writing and rewriting, and shaping and cutting and trying to find one's way through a mental maze of possibilities.

And the truth is, I often start a script still not knowing. For me this is often the best way to be. It is the carrot, this state. The desire to find something, when one is often grappling around in the dark. And it can come in many different ways and at many different times. Sometimes you get a hint of it in the research, a sense of what it might be.

Arthur Miller used to type out on a line, the essence of what the play was to be about, an organising principle, stuck to his typewriter to spur him on. I try to find something, something that intrigues me, haunts me, a piece of the puzzle that I don't know quite where it fits but know it may prove to be the most important and vital piece.

One of the first dramas I wrote was a four part serial for Channel 4 called *Murder*, starring Julie Walters. It focused on the murder of a young man as witnessed through the eyes of a journalist, a shopkeeper, a mother and finally the murderer. I was unsure when I started if it was really for me. And then I went to meet people, lots of people; journalists and police officers and detectives and families – mothers and sons and fathers and grandparents, husbands and lovers all who had lost people, violently and suddenly.

One afternoon I met a woman whose son had been killed whilst walking home. He didn't

know his attacker. It was a random killing in a Brixton Street. It was several years on, and while this woman had outwardly recovered, no one would expect to ever get over such a death. But I remember thinking, 'How has she done this, held herself together like this?' She looked great, she looked together; she was smiling. You could almost say she looked at peace. And then someone made a joke – a random, lame joke – that we laughed at politely. Only she kept laughing, one beat extra. But it was enough.

And I realised that at some point this tragedy had sent her mad. She had known madness. Wouldn't anyone go mad if they lost their child in some tiny way? This secret that no one had ever revealed to me until that moment – it was palpable and real.

It became the starting point for the mother, for Julie. This chink of light that I try to find, that I mentally stick on my laptop, it's a tribute to the master Miller. It is my running partner, my torch in the dark. Often it will be at the core of what my screenplay will be about. It is the start of gaining knowledge, of knowing something, however brief, and affirms to me that out of nothing, there is always something.

Outside of the facts; outside of what is visible. I call it the dog whistle that I have trained my ear to hear. With this in my armoury, I start at the beginning. I always write linear, I can never write an ending if I haven't found out where it starts. Openings are important to me. The first play I wrote took me two years and I think it was because I wrote and rewrote the first page maybe 100 times. I now think of that play as my apprenticeship. Then, I did use a typewriter. And I would yank the paper out theatrically, toss it in a ball and throw it in the bin, then start again. Isn't that the way writers do it in the films?

I now see it was the mental warm up, the place I was starting to piece together all the other moments and that the reworking and working is just my way of finding my way in. It's where I try to bring form to the chaos. Most of the writing journey is a process of this – finding form to chaos. Because as much as I try to stay in this state of nothing, pretty quickly my mind is racing, with all the people I have met, books I have read, films I have watched, interviews I have seen. The opening is when I am finally

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

alone; when it is just me. Well, the laptop and me.

Extract is read out from the opening of the script of The Hour.

I have never written a series before. No one told me what a beast they are - characters who keep coming back for more, stories that must run longer than four parts for 120 minutes. It has been a steep and fantastic learning curve writing *The Hour*; a way of laying out your shop again and again.

That is what the opening does, it lays out my shop: the film, episode, play I am about to tell. It has to intrigue me and excite me as much as I hope it will a viewer. For a few moments when I write, I try to be both punter and author. If it bores me then it will undoubtedly bore the audience.

In the fast-paced world of a newsroom, driven by deadlines, the energy of *The Hour* is the energy of a need to deliver, something that dogs my day. I understand what it means to have someone waiting, quite literally for copy on the end of the phone. Perhaps that's why I'm secretly in love with the characters so much.

I knew this opening needed to capture some of that. But at the time I wrote it what fixated me was a bygone era of news on the wane, an old order that was about to be punctured with the coming of the new. Freddie Lyon is a maverick journalist, working class genius. I would show him bored and disinterested. But I was wrong, it was not enough. Watching a final cut; something was missing, a sense of pace, a sense of jeopardy. As executive producer, I was in that rare privilege of giving notes to myself.

And this is where this state of knowing nothing really comes to the fore. Because in my limited experience most of writing is thinking that you have solved a problem and then discovering that you have it completely wrong and that you need to rewrite the equation again. A new scene was needed to open.

New scene is performed

And then a second, to establish a little more jeopardy and intrigue.

Second scene is performed

Until finally as right as you thought it was on the page, you get to see that throwing it up in the air is what makes it more than a good idea, and hopefully a good execution of an idea. That knowing nothing just might make it better. And that is all one is ever trying to do.

Opening clip from the same episode of The Hour

The ability to change, to shape-shift, is key in writing drama. That doesn't mean one has to concede on every point. The joy for me as a writer is that despite the fact I spend most of my life on my own in a room eating too much chocolate and drinking too much tea, eventually they let me out into the world.

And then I get to work with directors, and actors, brilliant actors and genius DOPs and designers and producers who listen and make your work sing. I have been lucky, I have been very, very lucky. It's amongst this ensemble where the work is really made. I never know if I'm the builder or architect. The role shifts all the time. But what I have come to conclude is that the script is the muse. For producer, director, actor, DOP and designer, it is the point of inspiration that everyone must think of as their own.

Handing over the script, delivering it, it's a bit like giving birth to a baby; sometimes an ugly, bothersome baby that you have loved and carried and cared for and fed for nine months. But now it is born. And, like having children, the shock is to discover that you give the most vulnerable part of yourself legs and you put it out there.

And very quickly you watch it adopted, you watch it become someone else's; hopefully and eventually an audience who will take it in as one of their own. And you have to just trust that you have done enough, that it carries enough of your genes that it won't grow up and become something completely separate from its point of conception, completely alien from its point. As I said I have been lucky; most of the time I am pleasantly surprised. And sometimes it is funny that an idea you have had, an imagining, a *what if?*, will one day be blown up on the big screen.

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

Clip from The Iron Lady

When I was first approached about writing a film about Margaret Thatcher there was a very good script in place. But at the time, the small screen had suddenly been inundated with some very brilliant films covering her early years, the Falkland Crisis, and beyond. Then I read an article, written by Carol Thatcher, about her mother describing what it is like to be with someone who now lives in 'an other world'. It was the light, the stray laugh that betrays the madness of a grieving mother. The mantra, mentally stuck on my laptop again.

Suddenly the life of Margaret Thatcher became the life of a very particular everywoman. A powerful, revered and often reviled former Head of State. It would not only be a study of power, but of loss of power. The ability of the mind to play tricks and rewind one's life would provide a structure, a form for the chaos of a rich and powerful life. But it would be a work of fiction. It would have to carry a bigger truth than simply a biopic. *The Iron Lady* is not a biopic.

Phyllida Lloyd and Meryl Streep coined it 'King Lear for girls'. The vision of the writer and director, that was intriguing. With Denis as her Fool, the husband who she still asked for, this would expose the frailty and the vulnerability of us all; even those who have once been great. Again I started from the place of not knowing anything. I read, I talked to people, I flooded my mind with interviews and articles and political memoirs.

Surely a biopic is different – and with the subject still alive? I approached it as I would approach any other subject. I am a writer of fiction, that is my job: to find something beyond the real – truth in artifice. Even if I know nothing, the film must know something. And this is the third thing I have come to understand. I have to find the chink of light. I have to find my opening, my way in.

And somewhere I have to find what I feel the film is about. Even if it is never used; even if it is never screened. I have to write it, place it somewhere in the thoughts and words of the character, enclose it in a scene; embed it in the heart of a film. The one thing I know, I know nothing. Until I know something. This is that something.

Clip from The Iron Lady, the doctor's scene

Shame came out of a meeting with the director and artist, Steve McQueen. It's interesting to work with an artist. I don't consider myself one. An artist for me is someone who holds on to the single vision. Perhaps that is why film is a director's medium. The director is the one who has to juggle all the balls from conception to set and then edit and beyond: the ringmaster and I suppose, I believe, the artist.

That does not mean I don't believe that as a writer I can't be part of creating a piece of art. I see works of art all the time in film. What should have been a blind date lasting no longer than an hour, set up by our mutual agents, lasted three. Neither of us took off our coats. It was winter and he must have been boiling in his heavy parka. But it didn't matter. It was a brilliant meeting of minds.

In this state of knowing nothing, I meet people who constantly teach me something. What I met in Steve was someone just the same, someone who was happy to riff and ramble on the big and small things in life, someone who was open and interesting and interested in the world. He was a true collaborator and one of the most inspirational people I have worked with, maybe even met.

For a film that in many ways has been called bleak and is at times desperately sad, I have never laughed so much whilst working on a script. We walked the streets of New York and talked for hours. The film was born out of these journeys under The High Line. We worked together in The Standard hotel, with its wide grey views over the Hudson in February. The city became a third character, walking side by side with the central performance of Brandon and Sissy played by Michael Fassbender and Carey Mulligan.

Focusing on the life of a man bound by his own compulsive sexual behaviour, the research took me into a world I thought I knew something about. Sex. We all do it. Or hopefully do it at some point in our lives. Over the weeks, months we worked on this film, together Steve and I met people who had worked with sex addicts or who were themselves recovering or battling with addictive sexual behaviour.

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

This was a world where I found more than a dog whistle. There was a constant surprising underscore of tiny behaviours and almost invisible transactions; that flooded my senses and made me realise that this was a world that affected us all. That I witnessed around me all the time.

From the conversations we had with those affected I found such a constant source of inspiration, that [it drove me] to keep searching, to want to open a door and let the light flood in. To live, to breathe is to be sexual. But when one is hardwired to convert every transaction into a sexual point of conquest, this hovers constantly close on tragedy.

Clip from the opening scene of Shame

This film, more than any other, has taught me about writing. Perhaps because I worked so closely with someone, I let someone in. It wasn't just me sitting on my own, slaving away through the maze. It was someone seated across the room, reading and re-reading, tweaking and re-working. The final film is in fact the last 40 pages of 100 page script.

We threw away the first 60 pretty early on which was, for someone who rewrites and rewrites, both frustrating and liberating. It then became a process of distilling and distilling. Perhaps this was also because I worked with a visual artist who trusted in the image, that less is more, and even if it's no longer spoken, it will be heard. It demanded that I trust in the power of film.

Having written several screenplays, I want to stay in the state where I think I know something and then discover I know nothing again. It drives me, it motivates me. It inspires me again and again. And it also makes me realise that the process of drafting and re-drafting, throwing away material, is never for nothing. Here is an early draft of a scene from *Shame*.

Extract is read out from the restaurant scene in Shame

And here is what it eventually became.

Clip from the restaurant scene in the final cut of Shame

When I was preparing for this I found some notes I wrote for *Shame* very early on, before I even started on the script. They made me smile, because I think, I hope, that the chink of light that motivated me to write *Shame*, the essence of why I write remains. Here are a few of those notes.

SHAME: *Shame* should be like a bag of sand, we should conceal it for as long as we can. Married? Single? Works on Wall Street. We see a normal day in the man's life slowly unpeeling. All seems normal, but slowly and surely we sense that something is wrong. He visits the bathroom. A normal act but with repetition we start to feel unsettled, suspicious. He works late most nights, the glow of the screen on his face. He takes the same route home from work, looks out for the same landmarks, the same tiny moments. As these build through the first 20 minutes we see that this is the start of some ritual, the behaviour of an addict. His addiction is sex.

Fade in; fade out to capture the sense of time moving on. This can be within the course of the day, to extend our understanding, slowly reveal the tiny details of this man's flight paths from work to home, from day to night. Or/and to show a sense of time passing over a longer period. Seducing the audience; take it slowly; but he is a man alone; in a toilet cubicle, doing what men do, alone; until someone unlocks the door.

I hope the film carries all of this. Like a dog whistle, inaudible but calling one to attention, provoking one to hear something beyond words, beyond language. Open but in a state of knowing nothing. Thank you very much.

Mark Salisbury: Thank you for that amazing lecture. The problem is you answered so many of my questions, but never mind. First of all we should actually thank Tim, Leon and Zoe for the readings, thank you very much.

So we've got just over half an hour, I'm going to ask a few questions – the ones I have left – and then I'll throw it open to you. You said in one interview that as a child you were an appalling liar, and you had an active imagination. Are they the essential traits for being a writer, do you think?

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

AM: That laugh is my mother, who's in the audience today. I was a liar, definitely. I would lie just for the sake of it, because it was fun. It was more fun than telling the truth I guess.

MS: Big lies? Little lies?

AM: Various actually. Some of them I would be too embarrassed to say in a room full of people I don't know – and probably even a room full of people I do know. But I think they were things like, my father's a police officer, we have a large German Shepherd. I remember trying to get round that for several months, of how we could get to school – we didn't have a dog, how could I prove that I had this German Shepherd. So those sort of things to 'who's eaten all the Penguin biscuits?'; 'I don't know, but I do believe that Grandpa came in....'

So lying was very much a natural path for me, because the truth seemed less interesting. And I guess I try and put myself in more interesting worlds, where the truth is interesting. I work very hard not to lie now, because I see it in myself in tiny ways. I think we all do it a little bit, it'll always be: 'God, those shoes are amazing, how much were they?' and I'll say they're five quid rather than ten. Those little things, you trick yourself at times. Holding on to the truth is quite important to me, the older I've got actually.

MS: You mentioned your mother being in the audience. Your mother is an actress and your dad was an actor and then a director. Initially you had ambitions to be a thespian, didn't you?

AM: I didn't, I really didn't actually. My mother is an actress, my sister was an actress, my father was an actor and then a director and I spent most of my childhood moving around. He ran a theatre for several years, so Saturdays were spent going to the theatre. So it was a very natural environment for me. I always say this, it's a bit repetitive, but if your dad's an electrician you know how to change a plug. The difference is my parents were actors and I really don't know how to act.

That is genuinely not false modesty, I just don't transform in that way. So I kind of knew pretty early on. It so happened that I did an audition for a job and I got it, it was touring Shakespeare abroad, so I did a year of acting and I absolutely hated it. But I really love actors, and

the older I've got the more I love them. Because I love their energy, I love the fact that when I'm ready to go to bed they want to wake up. I see that energy and I really revere it and love it, and I see its transformative powers with my work. So I have huge respect for it, but no, I really wasn't ever going to be an actress.

MS: One interview asked you what was the secret of your success, and you said 'I sit in my room acting things out,' so you must do some acting – unless you were lying there.

AM: I probably was, actually. But there's no one watching me so it's not quite the same. You don't have to transform in the same way.

MS: But do you act out your scripts?

AM: I don't literally, I don't do that. But I mumble, and I like being in the situations. I enjoy the experience of being in the screen. I always remember Sarah Kane saying to me, 'The first rule of theatre, the writer never gets a shag.' I always used to think, 'What does she mean by that; I'm never going to get a shag?' She was kind of right, as a writer you kind of organise the party, you put out the invites, but you don't actually go to the party.

I always feel like the moment I press 'send' is the most exciting moment, because I've lived it and I have walked through every character, but I don't get to actually do that thing of being on set. I normally end up talking to the catering staff; you are completely a spare part on set, as a writer. But I think part of me still wants the magic of the transforming. So I do it in my own head and in my own office, but never when anyone's around.

MS: So when did the writing kick in? Was it when you were at university? And is it true that you didn't show anything to anybody for five years, or is that another lie?

AM: No, I didn't show anyone. I spent a long time talking about being a writer. I think people were like, 'She's really not a writer, she actually looks after empty buildings.' I was a caretaker looking after empty buildings for six years. It was literally me and the Irish security guard and the cleaner. Try and organise a Christmas party with those three, I tell you. And I would try, every year.

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

So I spent a lot of time on my own, and I literally rewrote and rewrote the same play. I would rewrite the same page, and I was on a typewriter then, and then I was given an Amstrad – supposedly to log in important visitors to look at the office space – but most of the time I was writing a script. So I didn't show anybody anything for a long, long time. I wasn't one of those kids who wrote brilliant poetry or stories. I was very flatlined I think, in a way, because I was surrounded by showbiz, and if you're not going to do that you stay somewhere else. So it took a long time before I showed anyone any work.

MS: You started as a playwright, what were your ambitions as a writer at that stage? Was it just to have plays done? Did you think about television, did you think about films at all?

AM: No, it's really interesting, I didn't think about television at all, and my dad was a TV director at the time, and I think that was probably part of it. I really thought, when you grow up in the acting profession you live with a lot of anxiety about money. It's feast and famine, so it's constantly 'woo-hoo, we're rich, I've got a part,' and then it's 'when are they going to call?'

So I felt writing for me was about wresting back control, and I definitely had that 'when I get there, when I get there, when I get there.' I think there was that period, and I meet a lot of writers now, particularly young writers, and I'm quite moved by their experience sometimes because I didn't really make it – whatever making it is – I didn't really get my first proper money commission until my late 20s, early 30s really.

I spent a long time watching people zooming past me, and I would think, 'Just keep going, keep going, keep going.' There's a woman here called Pippa Harris who gave me my first commission, and it was £500 or £600 – ridiculous money – but I left my caretaking job on that treatment commission. It was a great moment.

MS: Do you feel in control now?

AM: I think other things make you feel in control, the older you get. I think you have to, to survive life, find other ways of getting stability. I don't think you can just constantly put

it in your work, or your thirst to get somewhere. So yeah, I hope so.

MS: You said *The Iron Lady* was a kind of work of fiction. Do you feel responsibility to the real life person when you're writing that though, and do you actually have to like the person that you're writing about in order to write about them?

AM: No, I think the inspiration for me – I saw *Downfall* and I thought it was just fascinating to watch a man lose power like that, who was so appalling. I didn't like him, but I connected with him. I think I grew to really have a great connection for the character of Margaret Thatcher. Personally, her politics, I think most people in the arts didn't adhere to her politics. And I didn't, I grew up in the 80s, so that was a huge part of my upbringing. And responsibility is an interesting one.

I've never written about someone who's still alive, and it is an interesting experience, and so it was very important for me to see that film as something other and to see it as a study of power and loss of power, and really connecting with the public profile of someone but also not being able to ignore the elephant in the room that was being spoken about in the press and that we all know about. So I do feel a responsibility, but I also feel that works transcend that as well.

MS: And strangely, it's not a very political film.

AM: No, it's not actually. It's not. That's also about ensemble and process and work changing and evolving and being bigger than your own political objective with it. So it definitely was amazing working with Meryl. She's a complete heat-seeking missile when it comes to staying close to the work. I spent a lot of time with her, on my own and with Phyllida [Lloyd, director] just sitting and working through the work, very slowly. It was a very tiny film for me.

It was literally meant to be, you see an old lady go to buy a pint of milk, and as she turns round you think, 'God, it's Margaret Thatcher.' I was never going to go to her political life, I was quite happy just to stay in that flat really. But film inherently becomes something other than your original idea, and that's the nature of film

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

and, I guess, the nature of what I was talking about.

MS: And with Steve McQueen, you mentioned that you wanted to meet him because you'd liked *Hunger*. Do you do that often, do you find filmmakers and directors that you want to work with and get your agent to call them up?

AM: I fixate more on actors actually, but I think that's maybe a bit more obvious. What is great is when you get directors approaching you, and it's always a real shock. It's a real, real shock. I recently met a rock star, our kids happen to be at the same school, and I was so nervous. It was my kid's party and he was coming to it, and I was thinking 'I'm going to dress really cool, he's just going to become my best friend.'

And he walked towards me and I was like 'tell him how brilliant he is, tell him how brilliant he is, tell him how brilliant he is,' and he said to me, 'God hello, I love your work.' And I was so shocked I just went, 'Thanks,' and absolutely blew my moment. I always think it's amazing when those great people happen to like your work. So I would never go up to a director and say, 'I really want to work with you.' But if a director ever said to me, which very occasionally happens, you get a director approach you.... I met a director last week who I literally sat in the room going, 'Sorry, [fumbles speechlessly].' I would never have the courage to do that, but when they come to me that's really great. I'm very susceptible to flattery, so I normally go 'yes.'

MS: You've got another year to build up to meet the rock star again, you'll be fine. So when you met with Steve did you have an idea for a film in mind? Or did that film become whole over the course of your conversation?

AM: I wanted to write about recent experiences and things that I thought about at the time. There was an experience that made me think... We talked about everything, really. We both have children, we both have partners; there were similar rhythms to our life I guess. We talked about our 20s and what that had been like and what's it like now going out into the world and internet dating, and does that drive to meet, to fall in love change when you're married and you're settled. No, I don't think it

does, but also what happens when that never settles?

I'd witnessed something recently, I'd witnessed somebody who I was close to really coming to the end of their life, and the thing that really shocked me when I watched them was that they only had a few hours to live and it was still important to them that they got the attention of the nurse.

And I'm talking about the sexual attention, the flirt. I thought, 'Good on you, you're in the last few hours of your life and you still want to get the attention of the nurse.' And that was really the starting point when I talked to Steve. I said I'd like to write about a man who's still looking for that kind of attention, right to his dying day. And so we talked around that and that's really how Brandon was born.

MS: Steve said the second time you met was in a restaurant as opposed to a café, and at the end of that conversation you'd written the first 20 minutes of the script.

AM: Yeah, yeah, I think certain people you riff with. I probably say through my career there's four or five people who are mentors, muses, inspirations and Steve is one of them. I think we riffed, and we talked that film together very quickly. I think we met in the April and we were shooting within probably 12 months. It was a really quick experience.

But then that's the joy of working with a filmmaker who's willing to make a film on quite a small budget and, you know, a lot of the time I think as a writer you can let go of stuff when you know that you've passed on the information and the sensibility will stay. So a lot of the time it was about passing on information to Steve and him giving me stuff back, and then I'd pass it back again. I think that second meeting, we'd really put it together.

MS: So how did the actual co-writing work? You've said before that you find co-writing difficult. How did it work in this case, you said you were in New York in the hotel....

AM: I live in London, Steve lives in Amsterdam, so we would meet in New York. Really simply, we couldn't get anyone to talk to us in the UK, because sex addiction isn't really recognised. There are lots of theories about it, but America

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

loves to talk, so you could really get people to talk out there. In America we were both able to plug into a whole group out there, and talk to people.

So we would talk, and the first time we went we met a lot of guys, predominantly, we found the addiction thing was slightly different with women. Oddly it was much more about romance and love and fantasy, it was a very different thing. But with the men it was much purer. It's a terrible generalisation, because I'm sure that's not true of everybody, but it was of this experience.

We would always kind of arrive and we'd eat. The restaurant scene's really interesting, because we would constantly be talking and there'd constantly be someone going, 'Yeah, that's great, Rioja's fine.' So that food thing, we'd eat and we'd talk and we'd meet people and then we'd write.

Shame was Steve's idea and Steve's title, because we would often meet people and then go, 'Fuck, we've got to get our plane.' And we'd get in a taxi, and the journey to JFK is about 35-40 minutes with traffic, and often we would just not be able to talk. It was very odd. There would just be this weight. And Steve just said to me one day, 'It's shame, can you feel it?' and I'd go, 'Yeah, it's really weird.' And it wasn't just their shame, it was our shame as well, about hearing the intimate details of people's lives. Steve and I would come out, we'd hear these terrible stories and then we'd be going, 'Have you ever done that?' And I'd go, 'Yeah I've done that, have you ever done that?' 'Do you think you're an addict?' 'No, I don't think I am.'

But it would be this thing; it was weird how sometimes some of this behaviour would brush onto your own. So that was the starting point, and then quite literally the way it would work was I would write, we would talk, he would read, he would talk out loud to me, I would write some more. He'd go off. But most of that film was written in the Standard, and of course the Standard becomes a very big location for the actual film, the song with Carey Mulligan singing is there and the Boom Boom Room upstairs. The big sex seduction scene is virtually in the room that I wrote in, so yeah, it felt very organic, the whole experience.

MS: You mentioned in your lecture that you threw away the first 60 pages of the script, and when I spoke to you once before about *Brick Lane* you said you did exactly the same thing. So how many drafts do you tend to go through before you do your first draft?

AM: I think I do more than most people, and that's not bragging, it's because I write very quickly and I draft. I'm a bit like a dog, throw me the stick and I run and get the stick and I come back and I'm like, 'What do you think?' So I need that sort of to-ing and fro-ing, so the collaborations are really essential to me. I do, I'd be embarrassed to say how many drafts I do really, but I do a lot of drafts.

MS: Oh, go on.

AM: I normally do 30, maybe. But I write very quickly. I write a film in about ten days. Go back and write again, write again, write again.

MS: So do you do those drafts in collaboration with the producers, or do you do them in isolation?

AM: Isolation. Then I go back. I gave in a draft on Monday, and then I met with the director on Friday and I have to do another draft in ten days. So it's often very high turnover, but that's often because you have a director going, 'Come on, I'm ready to make it, let's go, let's go, let's go.'

MS: So what kind of hours do you do?

AM: I do about nine 'til seven, five days a week maybe. And then I often work at weekends. I work around my children, so I work at night. I like night, night's a good time to write. It's hard when they're littler, but when they're older you get back your mornings again. I put them to bed about nine, and then I work until about two.

MS: Do you card your movies out, do you do outlines?

AM: I do quite tight outlines and treatments. That's a new thing for me because when I wrote plays I never did that. I like treatments, they're really essential to me but I also quite like the freefall sometimes, and I suppose that's what the rewriting is, it's a way of me freefalling again. So I'll often write something that feels

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

very good on paper, and then I'll work it, and then I'll throw it all away again. I'm quite good at throwing stuff away, I guess.

MS: *Shame* and *The Iron Lady* came out last year, with one week between the two of them, and on the surface they're completely different films, but they're both about loss and loneliness. Are there themes that constantly attract you?

AM: I think the weird thing about doing a lecture is sometimes it feels like this, I'm literally in the middle of playing the game of football. I feel people are saying, 'So tell me about your technique?' And I'm chasing a deadline at the moment. I'm late. So I feel it's very, very nice to analyse yourself, it's great for your ego and you try and find some kind of method.

But when it comes to looking at my themes I find it a bit uncomfortable to do that, because I don't want to be self-conscious with it. I know they're recurring, and I know there are phases that I go through. I think I went through a huge phase where certainly all my stage plays and maybe my early screen work was all about belief and faith, and was there a God. Now that I've decided there isn't one it's really easy, I've just cut that out and I'm on something different.

I think I've just come out of writing about a period of loss, and now I think I'm on something else again. So I probably go through cycles of themes, yeah.

MS: I think that's a good time to open it up to the audience.

Question: I have a question about *Shame*. You don't really give anything away about the character's backstory in *Shame*, apart from one tiny sentence. Do you know the backstory, or do you think it's important to know the backstory of the characters?

AM: Well, the 60 pages that went, and the last scene of the film was really the story. It never came out of Brandon's mouth, but you hear the story. So I know the backstory, and I never tell it. And that's really more out of respect for Steve, because Steve feels it's quite important that an audience makes their own assumptions, and I kind of like that.

Because I'm a blabbermouth, I quite like the fact that someone's gone, 'Don't talk, don't say.' So I know what it is, I know what my truth is about it, but I kind of leave it for an audience to decide for themselves really. But yes, I did write the scene, and yeah I do know what happens. You could pay me a lot of money later if you want.

MS: And how soon before shooting did those scenes get removed?

AM: They were pretty early on; Steve's very definite if he doesn't like something. I love it, because you have to fight back. Fire meets fire. That scene went very early on, although I kept putting it back in, the last scene I kept on trying to sneak it back in. It's interesting, the jury's out about that for me, but I quite like the fact that you don't know actually. My instinct would always be, and I think that's also my television head, because in TV you always have to go 'the answer is...' but I felt quite liberated from in the filmmaking.

Question: You mentioned how important the relationship is between you and the director, but do you envisage directing any of your own work?

AM: No, absolutely not. If I've had a glass of wine or I'm sitting and my ego's flying, I'm like 'I'm thinking about doing a short film,' but the truth is, I just think you have to want to get out of bed and put that big parka on and shout at people and be on set. I think it's cowardliness... I just don't have it. I could probably bitch about directors with the best of them but the truth is I like what I do, I really love what I do, it's probably the thing I love most.

The best thing someone said to me when I said, 'What do you think about me directing?' is they said, 'You know you probably won't be able to write for a year.' And that to me would be unbearable. It keeps me sane. So that's probably why I wouldn't direct.

Also, talent is also probably a big thing as well. I forgot that one.

Question: Given your prolific output, is there a script of yours that remains unfilmed, and what's the longest period a script of yours has been in development?

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

AM: I've got about five, and I think the longest is about nine years. I think someone told me *Notting Hill* was 11 years, I hold onto that. Actually I think one of my greatest scripts will never get made, just won't get made. It's a weird thing that.

MS: Is that an original screenplay?

AM: No, it's an adaptation, but again it's about loss and death. I don't know why, there are certain scripts that don't do it. That, if anything, would motivate you to become a director. That would do it. But it would probably be a pretty cruddy film, so I think it has to be in the hands of someone else, to be honest. But I think most good writers have that, don't they? The one that got away, you know.

MS: The gentleman alluded to your prolificness, you've said before you never get writer's block, you hide under the duvet but you never get writer's block. How many projects can you juggle at the same time? Can you write one thing in the morning and another thing in the afternoon?

AM: I do it in blocks. I definitely juggle. It was pretty hard last year, promoting two films and writing another series at the same time. It's very odd when films go out, because there is a huge industry around it, and although the writer, most of the time... I always remember my first experience of going to a premiere of a film that I wrote; there is a priceless photograph of producer, director, actor all standing in a line and I'm standing, literally, holding the coats.

To me that sums up writing, ultimately. You're often left holding the coats going, 'Should I be in that?'

MS: So you don't get shagged, and you hold the coats?

AM: Yeah.

Question: You were introduced to the film industry at a young age. Do you think if your parents had had a different profession your career would also be different?

AM: Mmm, that's a really good question. I feel a bit embarrassed by it sometimes... but the thing about writers is they come from everywhere. You see them everywhere, and I

love it. I go into schools sometimes now, and I can normally find the writer. I don't think it's necessarily affected by your background. I think the only thing that I think really, really has affected me is I think I saw so many plays growing up.

Most of the time I was falling asleep, most of the time I was literally watching these incredibly boring long, long, long plays. My tolerance for theatre is pretty high actually, but I think it's years of training of watching stuff, and I think what it did do is give me an unconscious sense of drama and rhythm and structure, which I feel is incredibly useful.

But I think it's more for me about.... I suppose it's the joy of writing but also the desire that I have something to say and I hope that would have been there whatever my parents had done really.

MS: You haven't forsaken theatre; you had two plays out in 2011, 2012. Why do you keep going back to theatre? Is it because the writer is God in theatre, and there's no other voices?

AM: Playwriting is like toothache for me, it just hangs there and it throbs, it's like pulling a tooth. I find it really hard writing plays, they do get harder, and I'm certainly not the greatest playwright, but I do find that they're quite good to go back to sometimes just for the purity of them. It's changed. A lot of writing for film is about writing about the space in between the lines, the images, whereas plays are so much about yes, you may have a great theatrical concept and a theatrical image but it's really about language and dialogue.

I find them harder to navigate, but I think for me they're quite good to go back to and sometimes just to dig a bit deeper, to go to a slightly different epidermis level and not to be... Film and television always feels like a game of maths, it's about structure so often. It's not that plays aren't that, but they're really the place of the author, the playwright. It's the Harold Pinter thing. 'Why did you write the line?' 'I don't bloody know.'

You don't have to answer [for] yourself, whereas in TV and film you constantly have to go [this is why I want this, this is why]. It's a bit of a battle, whereas playwriting is more of a

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

mental battle for me, but actually when you're out there you deliver, then your voice is central.

MS: And do you do as many drafts for a play?

AM: No, I don't. I don't really. And that's one of the big things I'd say about stage plays, is that I don't think they're worked enough, often. I'm constantly sitting there thinking, 'Why have they not cut a half hour out of this, it's bloody awful?' But also it's the great joy of it, that people are allowed to sprawl and fail and be brilliant.

Question: Do you have any tips on structure?

AM: Aaargh, I'm gonna be found out now. Oh God. I think there's a couple of writers here whose screenplays I download and I read. So I read a lot of other screenwriters. It's difficult with structure because I think you have the perfect structure and then directors come along. So you have to adapt. I'm sorry I don't have a great tip; I wish I could tell you it, but I really don't. It's a rhythm thing, for me it's a rhythm; I just sort of know when something's not quite working.

It's just instinctive. But when I want to shake that rhythm up and change that instinct, I will sometimes go to someone completely different. I'm working on a film at the moment and we're pretty close to getting it financed, but it needs a huge amount of money, and the director said to me, 'It's great, it's great, it's great – can we just have a little less art house?' He said 'more commercial,' and I went 'absolutely,' but then I thought, 'What does that mean?' What does that mean?

He went, 'You know, you know,' and I went, 'Do you mean *Pirates of the Caribbean*?' and he went '*Pirates of the Caribbean*.' And so I'm reading *Pirates of the Caribbean* only because I really enjoy reading screenplays. The first two screenplays I read were *Priest* by Jimmy McGovern and *Truly, Madly, Deeply* by Anthony Minghella. Very different writers, but they're really beautiful screenplays, so I get very inspired and I learn mainly about structure from reading, often, my peers' screenplays as well. I've just read Peter Straughan's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* which is brilliant, a completely different way of writing. So I'm going to nick it and use it and copy his style now.

MS: Different in what way to yours?

AM: It's really distilled, and it's really clear and it's really bold. It's Bridget [O'Connor] as well actually, and it just feels like you're in the film. It's without purple prose and yet it's beautifully poetic; a really amazing writer.

Question: Did you find writing *Shame* very different from your other projects, because when we see the final we can see longer scenes, the actors bringing something like faces – was that part of what McQueen tried to bring from you?

AM: I think it's where I started, and I think Steve brought me back to it. I think it's the way I want to work more; I want to work with directors more like that. And you know, what's interesting now, I'm doing a new film with a great director next year and the way things are working in America now is that you package in a different way. There's not the money, the films aren't being made in the same way.

So it often brings director, writer, actor, producer together much earlier on. It's the first time I've done that that early on, had a project – and it's an adaptation of a book – so I'm intrigued to work with that director very early on, because I think it will change my work and the way I write.

MS: Can you say who that is?

AM: I can't yet, I'm really sorry, but it will be announced very soon.

Question: Thank you very much; it was a very inspirational lecture. You say you write really quickly, do you meticulously plot things or do you sort of dive straight in and write the scenes?

AM: I plot, I plot. I spend a lot of time thinking and then I plot. I do quite a tight breakdown, treatment. It's really weird. It's made me much more self-conscious about my process, doing this. But you have to do treatments now, and even when I don't have to do them I do them now, because what I'm basically doing is starting a dialogue. I'm starting a dialogue with the producer or the director, and I'm saying 'This is what I want to write, what do you think?' This is what I want to write, what do you think?'

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

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

Abi Morgan

29 October 2012 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

And it's not just because I care about their opinion, it's because they are the channellers, the deliverers, they are the messengers. And if I don't get that message across that's when I watch a film and go, 'This isn't my movie.' So I structure, but part of that is to get it down to start the dialogue about structure as well, and to start the dialogue about plot and to start the dialogue about character and ideas. So yeah.

MS: I'm afraid that's all we have time for. Before we thank Abi for a brilliant lecture, can we also thank Jeremy Brock who started this [APPALUSE]. And Laura from the BFI and Tricia from BAFTA [APPLAUSE] and all those other people who help out and carry the microphones [APPLAUSE]. Thank you very much. And to the other screenwriters we've had: Julian Fellowes, Scott Frank, Peter Straughan, Brian Helgeland who I think is here, and Abi Morgan, thank you very much.