BAFTA A Life In Pictures: Sam Mendes
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Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this evening's Life in Pictures with Sam Mendes. The event is being filmed so please ensure that all mobile phones are switched to silent or airplane mode, and please refrain from any photography. Now please join me in welcoming this evening's host, Briony Hanson.

[Applause]

Briony Hanson: Good evening ladies and gentlemen, a very, very warm welcome to BAFTA. Thank you so much for joining us. As you all know Sam Mendes is one of the UK's most commercially successful, critically acclaimed film directors; one of the most we've ever had in the UK. He's also no stranger to the BAFTA stage. He's scooped approximately ten BAFTAs I believe, as well as eight Oscars and five Golden Globes. [*edit: Sam Mendes' projects have won ten BAFTAs, eight Oscars and five Golden Globes.]* By the time he turned to cinema he was of course already a hugely well-established theatre director. Mendes was Artistic Director of the Minerva Theatre in Chichester at the tender, straight after Cambridge. He then directed Judi Dench on the West End stage when he was just 24, and of course he founded and ran the Donmar Warehouse for ten years and made it the kind of pillar of theatrical establishment here in the UK. But we're not here to talk about theatre; we're here to talk about cinema. Mendes made his debut with *American Beauty*, which received a total of 14 BAFTA nominations, winning six. He's then skipped very ably, or apparently very easily from genre to genre, from period gangster to war films, from drama to road movie. And in every incarnation he seems to have effortlessly won fans, received huge acclaim. Just when we thought we knew what he was capable of he took a huge sidestep and became a director of the Bond franchise, the juggernaut that was the Bond franchise. His *Skyfall* grossed over a billion worldwide, and it became then and is still the most commercially successful film of all time in the UK. And as you all know *Spectre* opened with huge frenzy anticipation just a month ago and is still going strong in cinemas. We have a lot to talk about; just before we do I thought we should show a very quick clip reel just to remind you of the greatness of Sam Mendes.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

Welcome Sam, thank you so much for joining us.

Sam Mendes: Pleasure.

BH: You all know how this works; we have an hour or so to talk through the films that we've just seen in tiny big life there. You've chosen some clips so that we can talk a little bit more in detail, and then of course it will be plenty of time for you to ask your questions. So let's just start, this event is as you know entitled your Life in Pictures, but of course you had another life, a hugely successful career before you got to the pictures, which was in theatre. How actively did you pursue a career in pictures, or was it an accidental sidestep?

SM: Well I think that, by the way I love my introduction, I have in fact not won eight Oscars, although I would love to say that I have.

BH: I didn't say eight Oscars.

SM: Right at the beginning you said that and I thought, "I've died and gone to heaven." So, but thank you very much, it was very, very sweet what you said. So, well I went to Cambridge not knowing what I wanted to do at all. Theatre, film were, neither of those things were at the forefront of my mind. In fact I know, I remember going to the Freshers' Fair and sort of scoffing at all the drama stalls. Because I think theatre then presented itself to me, and I tried it and discovered that I loved to do it, and that I felt that I had something to say, eventually, that was the course I took. Film, I think if you're in any way interested in doing film in this country, certainly 30 years ago when I was at University it seemed an impossible path to take. There just was no conceivable way of doing it. There were no film courses, there were very, very few ways of getting into it, and all my heroes were either American or European, or the Brits that I loved, the Hitchcocks and the David Leans had

gone away to make their movies. So in a way I put it to the side of my mind, but if I look back I do think there were moments when I was at University when I absolutely knew I wanted to direct movies, but I just didn't want to admit it because it seemed like a preposterous dream, and the journey into it was a very, very sequitous one. And then of course theatre became my home, and for 15 years that's what I did, and then gradually I came back to the possibility of doing movies, mainly because at that time there were fellow theatre directors who had made that step. Then Ken Branaghs and the Nick Hytners and the Roger Michells and the Danny Boyles, those people were all directing theatre in the early 90s when I started out, and they showed that it was possible to do that. And that's how I kind of re-entered the journey to try to find a way of doing a film.

BH: And when you did make that journey, can you remember much about the differences and similarities? I mean how much was transferrable from your background in theatre?

SM: Well I've always said I think that theatre directing and film directing are completely and utterly different in almost every respect. Technically they're very, very different, and I think if you're working with an actor for example, what you're seeking to do on stage is to find a way to engage that outside eye, so that what they're doing in rehearsal they can repeat. So in a way you're both inside and outside in the theatre simultaneously. In film what you're trying to do is the opposite, you're trying to disconnect the outside eye, you're trying to encourage spontaneity and freedom, and no you know self-editing at all. And that goes for every aspect of filmmaking, every day is different, every scene is different, every shot is different, every take is different. In theatre it's about repetition, the French called rehearsals répétition, you know and that is what it is. It's about the same set, the same scenes, re-explored over and over again, refined and perfected we hope, although rarely that's the case. So I find them very, very different, except in one regard, and that is that I spent ten years at the Donmar, for example, and many other theatres, telling stories to 250 people a night that lasted two and a half hours. And learning how to read audiences, how to shift rhythm, how to tell stories that lasted an evening, rather than ten minutes or fifteen minutes or a half hour TV show or whatever, and that muscle is always being reengaged. And even now I find studios and people for whom I make films are always surprised that I want to put it in front of an audience, because for me coming from the theatre, unless it goes in front of an audience, it doesn't feel like it exists you know. It feels like how could I not put it in front of an audience? I remember when I first made *American Beauty* them saying, "Look, this is such an unusual film, you don't have to preview it, because an audience might not know what it is," or you know, which I thought was a very dismissive way of talking of an audience. But nevertheless, they were worried that it was going to score badly in a preview and it would knock it and knock me. And I said, "Actually, I want to. I want to go out there and do it, because for me you know I need to hear whether they laugh, I need to know whether there are boring bits," and you know that for me is the moment that it exists for the first time.

BH: Do you want to talk us through the clip you've chosen?

SM: Yes, well this is from *American Beauty*, I presume. So this, the story behind the movie and finding the movie is perhaps for afterwards, but this clip is a part of a section of the film that still remains to this day I think probably the one or two things I'm proudest of, which is that there's a ten minute section, maybe 15 minutes in the middle of the film where I feel it shifts from being a broader comedy into something completely different. And this is when Ricky shows Jane, the two kids in the movie, the most beautiful thing he's ever filmed. And then it shifts very quickly into a scene of a completely different tone entirely.

BH: Can we see the clip please?

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

Kevin Spacey tells a great story about you shooting the first, the very first day's shoot on this film, and how you got to the end of it and decided it was all rubbish and everything except the script did not work, so you made them do it all over again. How did you have the confidence, given that this was your debut, to go up against a studio, to talk to established producers, established stars, and make that decision.

SM: Well I was very fortunate in a way because everything about it was crap and it was very clear to me, not on the day I hasten to add, on the day I was very proud of it. I thought, "My God, I've done my first day, isn't it great? You know I said 'action' and 'cut' and people turned up, and you know we finished the scene." I mean they're the things that you think about when you haven't really done that before. And then, you know we shot it on film so you see the dailies, you see the scene that you've shot the end of the next day, so by that time we'd shot two days. And I went to the screening room at Dreamworks to watch it and it was very clear to me that I'd actually been lucky in a way because everything about it was wrong. The costumes were a little broad, performances were over the top, the framing was very stiff, I hadn't directed the background properly, it wasn't well lit, I'd chosen the wrong location. And there was one significant, it was a scene where, those of you who know the movie, Kevin's character Lester goes and works in a burger joint, and it's the scene where he goes for his interview in the burger joint. And it suddenly became clear to me it should be a drive-in, and it should occur to him when he was in the car and all these other things. So I was fortunate, because if it had have been slightly wrong I probably wouldn't have had the courage to know that it was wrong, if you know what I mean. But because I felt very, very clear, it was very clearly just not what I wanted; I went to the studio at the end of the second day. In fact they said, "How do you think it's going?" And I said, "I've got to be honest, I really don't think it's right." Both days, it was the first two days, and "Can you let me do it again please?" And they were slightly taken aback, but I think that after that they knew I was so adamant about what it was; it clarified what I was trying to do. And from then on it got increasingly better I think, after a couple of weeks I hit my stride.

BH: And how, I mean similarly with that same confidence, how did that carry on even though one of the producers was also the writer, Alan Ball? I mean how did you, as a kind of newcomer, come in to something which was so close to him, such a personal thing for him, and he knew what he was doing.

SM: Yeah, well the thing about *American Beauty*, it was a brilliant script, and the fact that the script found its way to me was one of the luckiest things that's ever happened to me. It was a brilliant, brilliantly written, brilliantly judged, and very visually articulate script right from the very beginning. And Alan, but Alan was not an experienced screenwriter, Alan had started in sitcoms and was actually very disappointed in what had happened to his career and then wrote this script in a way as much out of anger over what had happened to him. And he was a first time screenwriter, producers Dan and Bruce were first time film producers, and I was a first time director. So actually it was a gang of people finding out how it worked all at the same time, and that was also helpful, because I never felt patronised or guided by another person, I felt like I was able to discover the movie I wanted to make for myself.

BH: And what kind of a director of actors did you turn out to be, a film director of actors?

SM: Gosh, it's very difficult to speak about what and how you work with actors as a director objectively, I only know how I do it. I think one of first things about being a director is that you don't see other directors…

BH: I mean in comparison to how you had been on the stage.

SM: Right, but even so I don't know how I am in a rehearsal room; I just do what I do. I think if you're self-aware, if you're watching yourself enough to analyse the kind of, it's like being a writer or a painter. "What kind of writer are you?"

"Well I just write how I write." And if you're too self-editing, self-critical, then you stop, you lose, you have too much self-conscious, you know you lose freedom and the power to invent and to be free. For me directing actors on screen is different for the reasons I talked about before, because you're trying to encourage a kind of lack of self-awareness. And, for example, I found myself directing Kevin very hard on film. We would often do 12, 13, 14 takes, which for me is quite a lot, because he's all about being the smartest guy in the room. It's very crisp what he does, it's very deliberate, it's a great attack, but sometimes it's just too fully formed. And that kind of freedom, I needed to shake it up a bit. I needed it to feel like he was just in the moment, always in the moment working out what to do next, and never fully aware of the effect he was having on the people around him. So, for example, that scene that you see at the dinner table, a lot of that was improvised in rehearsal, and then Alan Ball the screenwriter scripted it. So that stuff that Annette says when she's having her little dialogue with herself, that's improvisation. When she says, you know and when he says, "I didn't lose my job, it's not like, 'whoops, where did my job go?'" Well that's an improvisation from Kevin as well. Again that sort of freedom to just kick things around, to work at speed, that, and my awareness of them as actors obviously was honed in the theatre working with actors day in day out, but the way I worked with them is very specific in the movie. And I've worked like that a couple of times since, where I've given people, in fact on *Spectre*, on the last movie, I gave people a lot of freedom, more freedom than I had on *Skyfall*.

BH: And it still feels, watching it again now it still feels incredibly challenging. Did you ever feel that you needed to tone it down, or did anybody try and sort of rein you in and tone it down?

SM: No, nobody ever tried. And you know it is challenging, it's a very, very bold orchestration of dissonant tones, the film. It's very unusual in that regard, that you shift from something that has that kind of level of poetry, both visual and spoken, and shift into something that openly theatrical in a way. And those things co-existing was what made the script unusual, and I determined to pursue each tone to its fullest degree, and not to homogenise it and make it all feel naturalistic. So what I had in my head from a very early stage was a very, very formal, composed movie. I storyboarded it, I had a very, very specific way of shooting it. I don't really know why, it just was there when I read it, and that again, that muscle is honed by theatre direction. You read it and your brain translates it very quickly into image, and that's where you know you learn to judge whether the images are any good or not later in your career. Early on I thought oh I could you know, I think, you thought it was enough to simply like something to do it, and it's not. You have to have a way in, you have to have some degree of insight, however small, that's yours and yours only, that gives you the feeling that you are the person who should be doing this. And that's the tricky thing is to find that voice in your head that makes it yours, that make you feel like it's yours. But I always felt attached to the screenplay, from the moment I read it I thought it was, I had a way of doing it. And from what was in my head to the end result is almost the closest with my first movie than with any other.

BH: That's kind of bizarre. And this was presumably the first time you'd ever worked with a film director, in this case Tariq Anwar.

SM: Film editor.

BH: Sorry, film editor, forgive me. How much did you get a sense that you were getting a second shot at telling the story when you got to the edit process?

SM: Oh editing was a, I couldn't believe how much fun it was when I first got in there, I couldn't believe how free you feel and how creative it is. And Tariq is a brilliant editor, but Tariq only half edited the movie. The first editor and I parted company about halfway through, then there was an assistant editor who helped me for two weeks. But I was in the room all day every day, and I'm not sure that's necessarily a recipe for a well-edited movie always, but in this case I loved it

and I couldn't get enough of it. It feels like, it's the closest you ever get to writing as a director if you haven't written the script. But for me a lot of directing is rhythm. What defines you as a director is your particular rhythm, and it's not just a rhythm within scenes, it's the rhythm between scenes and the courage to shift rhythms and shift gears with the kind of abruptness in a way that you see in that last clip. And that's something that I was able to manipulate in the editing room, and Tariq is a wonderful editor and I was very fortunate on the last movie, on *Spectre*, to work with a guy called Lee Smith who's another kind of genius entirely. But no it's a great art.

BH: And so you got to the end of this one, and then sort of thought you'd do it all over again. Was there ever a point, there's that hideous statistic about first time directors, you know, something like 80 percent of first time directors don't make another feature film.

SM: Is that right?

BH: It is right, which is horrifying. You've done all that learning and then you don't do it again. You obviously were not going to be in that position, clearly because of the acclaim that you'd had for *American Beauty*. But was there ever a point when you just thought, oh God, this is just so hard, I'm going back to you know the smaller world of theatre that you…

SM: Oh I think that every time I make a film, yeah. "I've had enough of this, I'm going back and doing a play," and that's how I get my feet back on the ground. I mean Steven Soderbergh is a good friend and a great film director, he calls them, he does smaller films, and he calls them his 'purification movies', which always makes me laugh. You know as if to sort of you know, he's sullied himself with a big commercial movie like *Ocean's Eleven*, and now he's going to purify himself, but the truth is you do need to get a big movie out of your system. But you know for me it's odd, the very fact that we're here talking about my Life in Pictures, because I don't equate it as a consistent line of movies, because that's not how I work. To me *American Beauty* is part of a group of work that include *The Blue Room* and *Cabaret* on Broadway, which were the two things that I did immediately before *American Beauty*, and for me I can see the influence of those productions in the film. *Road to Perdition* was the time that I was doing *Uncle Vanya* and *Twelfth Night* at the Donmar, and again. And right up to *Spectre*, the thing I was doing before *Spectre* was *King Lear* at the National, and you see in some of the scenes in *Spectre*, you see in the big boardroom scene where the blinding takes place the influence of Lear and the way it looks, the way it feels, and the blinding itself. So for me I don't see it as a line of movies, I see it as a sort of organic body of work. It sounds very pretentious but it's true, where you at certain points in your life you become obsessed with certain things and you explore them from different angles, sometimes live and sometimes filmic. And so I never felt like I went from *American Beauty* straight to *Road to Perdition*, what I did was go from *American Beauty* back to the Donmar. I went and sat in my office again and thought, "Okay, this is real life and I'm back here, what play am I going to do next? And by the way, what are we going to do next season?" And that's my way back into some level of normality.

BH: And so how did get *Road to Perdition*?

SM: How did I get it? I was sent it by Dreamworks who had produced *American Beauty*, and it was a very, very, it was a lumpy script. But I loved the central idea, which was this father and son who were cut adrift in sort of mid-America in the 30s, and it seemed to me to have a kind of grandeur of almost a Greek tragedy. And the story I thought had one great idea which is that the Tom Hanks character, Sullivan, was forced to kill his own father, or his surrogate father, in order to save his son, which seemed to me an incredible tragic idea. But there was also this amazing landscape, this desolate landscape with time when you could be cut adrift in the mythic landscape that was prohibition era America. And we shot it in Chicago in the dead of winter, and it was a very solitary and lonely time coming back from making *American*

Beauty and all the acclaim, and feeling, myself, sort of very isolated, and a lot of that went into the film. And the sort of the coldness in and around the movie, the sort of stillness of it, that comes from my mood at the time. I mean I think that happens much more than in theatre, the mood and the way you feel and your emotional landscape gets put into the films that you make almost subconsciously. You know you don't think, "I'm going to, I'm feeling a bit this today so I'm going to stick it in the scene." You just do, it just happens. And you look back at the films and you think, "Oh yes, that's how I was feeling at the time."

BH: Let's have a look at how you were feeling at the time then. Do you want to just quickly set up this clip?

SM: Yeah, this is the very, very end of the film, when as I said Tom Hanks is forced into killing his own surrogate father, played by Paul Newman, and in the rainy streets of Chicago, 1930.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

BH: I'm struck so much, of course, by the silence in that scene. How much, and actually which is mirrored throughout the whole film, there's very little dialogue, how much of a contrast did that feel having come off the very talky *American Beauty*, and presumably the talkiness of some of the stage productions you were doing at the time.

SM: I think what you see there is me kind of falling in love with the visual power of the cinema and the fact that you don't need to speak all the time, and that language is not necessarily the number one way of conveying story. I mean there's an interesting story about that particular sequence which is one of the reasons that I find it interesting, is that one of the things that I enjoy most about the process of filmmaking is the mix, the sound mix and the end of the process. And for whatever reason I could not get that scene right at all, and all the way through the sound mix it used to drive me mad, endless machine gun noise, and it felt very, very prosaic, very kind of leaden. And then right at the end I said about a day before we finished, I said, "Just see what happens if you pull all the sound out and just let it be Tom Newman's score," which by that time of course we'd recorded. And that's what you see. And that was done a day before the end of finishing the movie, we just pulled all the sound out, and so the first actual machine gun fire you hear is when he kills Paul Newman's character. And that's something that, you know it's interesting about film is that one the one hand it's incredibly planned and incredibly you know kind of prepped, you know prep is everything. And on the other hand there is a kind of freedom there, right through to the very end when you can change huge and substantial things in five minutes, and that's very freeing and also very frightening. Because there are some films that do not benefit from this process, and there are some that do. And I've always felt like that was the moment that I felt I'd found the kind of semi-operatic tone that I'd wanted the film to feel like, a dreamlike quality in which there was a sort of weird stillness and emptiness in those streets and those people, a loneliness about it, and it came right at the end. And by the way, I should say, you know one of the greatest, I think probably one of the two or three most happiest collaborations of my artistic life, theatre and film, was with Conrad Hall, who was the cinematographer on both *American Beauty* and *Road to Perdition*. And I think you see in both those clips his absolute genius. I mean when I see the scene where they're watching the plastic bag, and the light he puts on the two of them in close-up, which is almost, it's very, very deceptive. He doesn't light either of them directly, you know, the light is hitting the back of their neck. But the feeling of being in that room, the feeling of the beauty of that little tiny suburban room, the scale it gives it. I think lighting and you know true lighting cameramen are very, very thin on the ground, and I think when you find one or two, and I'm lucky enough to have three of them, you have to hold onto them because it's a real, real art. And however much one thinks one is controlling the light, you know I want light coming through that window or whatever, true lighting cameramen add something completely

different. And again there I said to Conrad, "I want Tom to disappear into the darkness. I want him to appear out of darkness and disappear." And so we dumped you know an absurd amount of rain and we cross-lit, he cross-lit the rain, and so he disappears almost like a ghost at the end, and that's something that you can only do with a great cinematographer.

BH: And what other kind of visual references did you give him and your production team for this one? You know you're coming off the back of a whole bunch of gangster films; this could be a very kind of clichéd thing, which it's absolutely not. Like what kind of discussions did you have around the look and flavour?

SM: A lot, I mean I think the greatest gangster film, luckily, is not set in the 30s, which is *The Godfather*, because it would have been almost impossible to try and avoid it you know. But I felt I wanted to not fetishise the period, I wanted to feel like we were looking through a window into another time and for it not to be writ large, the style. I mean in a way it was the opposite of a movie I'd like very much but didn't want to make, which was *The Untouchables*, which had come out a couple of years before and was all Armani suits and they'd advertise Armani and you know the double-breasted and pinstripe, and this is absolutely the opposite. It's all heavy, heavy wool coats, freezing cold Chicago, these very, I mean Albert Wolsey did the costumes brilliantly, and I felt I wanted a level of reality, you know and just the way I intuited period through research. The thing is we don't know what the 30s looked like. I mean you know you have some pretty shaky news footage of, you know for period films to refer to, but you don't get colour which seems to me to be the most crucial thing. You know you don't know what kind of weight, the texture of fabrics, the way skin looked, all that sort of thing. You know that's, we feel we know the 30s but we don't, we know it from painting and we know it from movies, we know it from other peoples' interpretation of the 30s. So we went back to, we looked at a lot of art of the period, I can't even remember, there were some great artists, I can't remember their names now, but Hopper was obviously a huge influence in the way that he isolates people in interiors. But Hopper has also been an influence for *American Beauty*, because he paints people locked behind glass in kind of cages, frames, always trapped within frames, and that's something that has been a continuous visual theme in other movies I've made as well, it's just something that interests me.

BH: Did you go back to the comic book?

SM: No, the comic book is drawn in a very different style. I love the comic book, but it's much more dynamic, it's much more; it's a comic book you know. But I'm a big believer in the graphic novel as a form and I think, I mean now it's, that's like saying you know, "I like novels," or something, I mean they're everywhere. But at the time it was quite unusual to have a major film made out of a comic book, a serious movie.

BH: We should move on quite quickly but I just wanted to touch on the fact that this was Tom, Paul Newman's final live action role. Kind of how much did the weight of working with an actor like that kind of affect you? How much were you prepared to kind of let him just do his thing, and how much did you feel confident in giving him direction?

SM: Well, I mean you know it's very rare one gets to work with one's heroes, and it's even rarer to find that they're still heroes when you've finished working with them, and Paul was one of those people. He was just, he's just like God you know, except probably slightly never. He really is, he was an extraordinary man. And in fact two of the people, Judi Dench is a similar person, who makes everyone around them better. They are the least grand people, they want to work, they're only interested in the work, they don't take themselves very seriously but they take the work seriously, and you know somebody like that you might be nervous about for half an hour, but the moment you meet him he's just an actor who wants to do a good performance. And you're his director and he's going to listen, he may sometimes disagree but he's going to absolutely work with you.

There's no sense of him arriving or being grand in any way, I mean to meet him you'd think he's the you know… All he was interested in, frankly, was bringing beef sandwiches to the set from a local Chicago cafe that he'd found, and you know cooking people chicken on a Sunday. I mean and he had no entourage at all, he had nothing in his trailer, you know he just wanted to work, and I thought he was, he did some things that were so cool. We had an overage, if you go over with a big star and you've agreed to shoot them out let's say for two weeks, I'm going to shoot all your scenes in two weeks or three weeks, I think we had agreed to shoot him out in three weeks, and if we went a day over the studio got penalised to the tune of I think a quarter of a million, per day. And we got rained out really badly on a couple of days, and we got over, and sure enough we did two extra days with Paul so he was owed half a million dollars. And the studio thought he would just waive it and say, you know, "It's okay." He said, "No, where's my money?" And they were like, "But you know, we were rained out." And he said, "I don't care." And eventually they paid him; they gave him a cheque for half a million dollars and he handed it straight to his charity. And that, he just didn't like, you know he wasn't, he was very suspicious of Hollywood studios. He didn't live on the west coast, he was a New Yorker, you know he ran his theatre with his wife up in Connecticut and he was a great man really, an amazing guy.

BH: We're going to skip genres now and go to your war film. Before we do, I was obviously thinking about this a lot, thinking about the kind of throughline in your work, which I'm finding very hard to find in fact, but we'll come back to that in a moment. But there's one very constant throughline, which is your collaboration with Thomas Newman, who has done all but one of your films. Can you talk a little bit about finding him in the first place and how you've kind of moved from film to film with him?

SM: Well I was very fortunate, I was a big fan of Tom Newman's work, I remember hearing the score for *The Shawshank Redemption* which I think is one of the great, well it's a great movie and it's a great score. And I had been, I'd sort of set my heart on trying to persuade him to do *American Beauty*, but in those circumstances he was the senior one and I was the junior, so I was trying desperately to persuade him to do this little movie for nothing. And he wrote an unbelievable score for *American Beauty*; so varied and so nuanced and so witty and with so much fun and zest in it. And I'm a big believer in if someone has talent they, you know they have the talent to span and change and develop and work in ways that they perhaps have never worked in before. And you know it was very interesting coming onto the Bond movies with *Skyfall*, for example, that there was a great trepidation shall we say from the producers and from the studio about using Tom Newman to write an action score, or using Roger Deakins to shoot the movie because he'd never shot action before.

BH: Or presumably using anyone who wasn't David Arnold?

SM: Or using anyone who hadn't existed in a world, in a sort of franchise world. And I was trying to introduce lots of people and you know, but also I didn't want to you know kind of assume that I was going to take out everybody that had worked on Bond movies before because there were many people that I did want to use. So, anyway Tom proved that he could do it; in fact he won the BAFTA and was nominated for an Oscar for the *Skyfall* score, which was a brilliant score. But you know I think that he's incredibly gifted, and somebody who you just have a shared language with. I think that for me the best collaborators you get a kind of, you know if anyone else were to listen to it it would be a collection of bad jokes, you know catchphrases, odd little quirks, you know you read each other very quickly. He knows very quickly when I don't like a piece, just from the way I am in the room. You muddle along, and also the best collaborators know when to say know to you, you know, "I don't want to do that. I don't think that's right," you know, and to have the courage to do that. And I'm very willful and you know like any director I'm constantly pushing and pushing for a singular vision, and

they will often say, somebody like Roger or Conrad or Tom Newman, "I don't think that's right." And those are the ones you've got to hold onto because they're talented and they have an opinion.

BH: He's also one of those people where you know it's a Thomas Newman score, yet it doesn't kind of intrude, you can still have a very different experience watching each film, it doesn't overpower each film.

SM: Yes, well he's not bombastic, and he's interested in the movie, and he's incredibly lacking in ego, and he's very unjaded. He's the least cynical person I know, which is an incredible thing when you've scored that many movies to not get into that feeling that you know somehow you've been here before, he never gives that at all.

BH: Let's sidestep to the Gulf War. Tell us about *Jarhead*.

SM: Well you know, it's interesting what you say about never finding any kind of throughline, any thematic throughline, because in a way that's very deliberate. I've always challenged myself to do each movie different from the last, and the only time I've not adhered to that rule is doing two Bond movies back to back, but even then I tried to push them in different directions. And part of that is my nature I think, is that I've always wanted to explore different ways of making films and challenge myself and not repeat myself. But part of it is also the after effect of success with my first movie, because what comes with winning an Oscar for your first film when you're surrounded, you have to imagine yourself you know surrounded by your heroes. You know I'm in whatever it was, The Shrine, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, whatever the hell they call that place, and you know there's David Lynch and Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg and Paul Thomas Anderson and – and – and right, and I'm going to win the Academy Award for my first movie. And these people of Altman, Scorsese, Lynch have never won an Academy Award, you know it's ridiculous. How do you justify that? How do you make that okay you know? And I decided very early on to make it like a kind of bank loan, that I would pay back over time, and I would eventually justify having won to myself and to my peers. Because you know it's very, very tricky to try and, well where do you go now? Well do we just keep repeating the same thing or do we keep pushing and trying out and exploring? And so you know I read this book *Jarhead* and it seemed to me the closest… I'd often thought what would happen if I had been conscripted, if I had been born in the Second World War, if I'd had to fight. I'm a total physical coward, I'd probably be absolutely terrible in those circumstances, and there was this book written by a literate person who was in a sense sent to war. So it felt to me like the sort of thing that might happen if I had been in those circumstances. And what it is, is a very, very strange and unusual book about a man who goes to war and never fires his gun. It's almost apolitical, it's Beckettian in a way about waiting, and it also had a lot to say about the Gulf War and American's involvement in the Middle East at that time, but it was a very trickily timed film. But it was also for me an opportunity to throw out everything I'd done in the first two movies; I didn't want to storyboard, I didn't want the camera to stand still, I wanted to shoot it handheld, I had a new cinematographer Roger Deakins, we were often shooting on two cameras, and I wanted a freedom in front of camera to take away some of the stiffness and some of the formality that I'd felt making the previous two films. So I threw out the rulebook if you like and started again. And the scene, I think this scene is a scene, which again, some of which was improvised, and what you see kind of almost got out of control. A scene where Jake Gyllenhaal's character, Swoff, who wrote the book, is going kind of insane because he's not seeing any action and he's not seeing war, and the things that were promised to him at boot camp are not being given to him, and now he's beginning to turn in on himself.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

BH: There are a number of scenes like this in this film where I wonder if you ever feel that you can push an actor too far?

SM: Well actually, since you mention it, that's kind of what happened in this scene. You know I had a, I said look you, because in this case I couldn't get the required intensity out of Jake, and so what I was doing a lot of the time, well in this particular scene he was brilliant, but he was, I was rolling takes, in other words I wasn't saying, "Cut," I was saying, "Do it again, do it again, do it again." You know I was shouting stuff out during takes, so again it was part of my attempt to break the formal of the sort of rigid, "Action. Cut." formality of filmmaking. Just roll a ten-minute mag on film and just say, "Go. Go. Do it again. Do it again." I would shout stuff out. And I said to Brian Geraghty who was playing Fergus, the other character in it, I said you know, "You've got to slam your hand out if you want me to cut." And he didn't, and actually he really pushed that gun into Brian's face. And then Jake in this take chipped his own tooth, he jammed the muzzle right into his mouth and broke his front tooth, and you can even see it in the clip. And it was kind of, it was rocky. But you know it was a weird thing because we were in the desert in Mexico in a weird place called Laguna Salada, which was a dry lakebed. It's completely flat for as far as the eye can see, just baked sand, I mean it's an incredible place, and a lot of people, myself included, find the desert kind of purifying and very beautiful. But some people, including a lot of the cast, find it very claustrophobic, and you do go kind of mad there. And we were stuck in these tents day in day out, and it was just men, never a good thing, and so it was very intense. I felt like I wanted to shake things up and so that was partly the way, I wanted to change the way I was working with actors and with the camera as well.

BH: And was there a difference, by the time you made this you'd already started Neal Street Productions, your own production company, to do this and to do TV and to do theatre. Did it feel differently as a director to be making something you were slightly more in control of?

SM: Why do you say slightly more in control of?

BH: Well than you had perhaps been previously…

SM: Oh you mean producorially? No, I don't, I think every director is a bit of a producer, I mean you have to you know you're, but actually formally producing it. I mean, for example, I had a producing credit on *Road to Perdition* but I didn't have one on *Jarhead*. No, I think I'm always just a director when I'm on set, and that means that when I go over budget it's someone else's problem.

BH: And what made you want to take on a war film in the first place? I mean why, you talked a little bit about wanting to try your hand in a different way, but again there's a sort of weight of history with war films, not necessarily this war, I mean there are a couple of different examples, but you know traditionally war films. How did you think about trying to create something new, trying to avoid cliché, trying to you know bring a new statement about war films.

SM: I think the material has to have within it the avoidance of cliché. I mean you are you know influenced by other films to a degree, but for me my way in is always through the central character. And I you know, sometimes it can be a couple of central characters simultaneously, but in this case it was Anthony Swofford had written a book, I'd met, and I cast Jake Gyllenhaal as. And that for me was my way in, was that very particular kind of slightly lost, you know and again for me personally I felt at that time, you know I was in a completely new world, I'd moved country, I was living in America, and I felt like I was in a kind of, sort of lost in the woods a little bit, artistically. And I think you see it in the movie as well. I think tonally it's uncertain, I think it doesn't know whether it wants, how political it wants to be. I think the script was much more political and I regretted on numerous occasions after finishing the movie taking a lot of that out. There was also a lot of fantasy sequences in the movie, which I also took out. I think it had a kind of, but it was never quite certain

exactly what it wanted to be while I was making it or even afterwards in the cutting room. And again that mirrors my state at the time, you know in a way I look at it and I see an interesting part of a journey that hasn't finished yet, and I think for me it was all about finding some way of challenging myself and shocking myself and giving myself, taking myself out of my comfort zone.

BH: Does that mean you're less satisfied with this as a film when you look back on it?

SM: Yeah, I mean there are certain films, you know people always say, film directors particularly say, "Oh they're like your children, you don't value one over the other." But there are some that didn't complete their education properly, put it that way. You know and a couple took to drugs briefly. So you know this one feels slightly like an errant child and I felt like it was my, you know, flaws that weren't able to craft it in a way that I wanted it to be. But you know then I look at it again, I mean I had to watch these movies for this event and I don't you know as a rule sit around watching my own films, and in fact I hadn't seen this for, I mean I made it in 2005 so I haven't seen it for maybe nine years. And I was pleasantly surprised by some of it, and I felt, "Gosh, actually there's some really good stuff in here." But it doesn't really hang together for me.

BH: Okay I'm going to rush you on.

SM: Rush away.

BH: Where does *Revolutionary Road* sit in your family of errant children?

SM: Oh Gosh. Well it was a movie that, it was a really unusual film to make because it was so, because I was directing my then wife in a movie about an unhappy marriage, so join the dots.

[Laughter]

Although at the time I would have said, "Absolutely not autobiographical in any way." So there was that, and a movie in which I happen to think she's completely brilliant as well by the way, and as is Leo. I think they're really remarkable performances, particularly in the second half of the film. I found it very frustrating because it's based on a great novel, and novels are not shaped like movies. Movies tend to be linear on the whole, the best of them, I think. One of the things I struggled with between *Skyfall* and *Spectre* for example was that *Skyfall* for me was a linear movie and *Spectre* was web-shaped. And that's, web-shaped is a great shape for an episodic television show for example, you explore each strand of the web and then you discover who's sitting in the middle of the web, perhaps in episode eight, right? But as a movie not quite so easy to try and manipulate that shape into a clear narrative over two and a half hours, or two hours. And *Revolutionary Road* has a problem which is that it starts with them, a couple very, very unhappy, it takes them to happiness briefly, and then it takes them back down to where they started. Well that fundamentally, I always struggled with as a shape, a narrative shape. So what I did was I tried to put at the front of the movie the day that they meet, which is the moment when there is hope and you do see their beauty and their love for each other, but it never quite felt organic, that was something I did in the cutting room. So I was always sort of reaching for, to try to find, I was always fighting against this novelistic shape. Beyond that though again I thought, I watched again and I thought the last part of it is very, very powerful. And the clip that I chose is once, it's really all shattered their relationship, you know that he makes a promise to go to live with her in Paris, he then reneges on the promise, he has an affair at work, and she spirals out of control. And she has made I think the previous night, you clearly feel this in the movie, the decision to have an abortion, she's pregnant, and with that accept the dangers that come with it, almost a suicide note. She's made that decision and they've had a terrible, terrible fight, and he comes down in the morning expecting the fight to continue, and he finds something completely different.

BH: Let's have a look at the clip.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

So you mention this is from a Richard Yates book, which seems to me to be unbelievably cinematic, it's like reading a script. Was that your experience?

SM: Oh gosh, not really. I think there's an awful lot of talk in the book, and when you actually boil it down you've got a five-hour script. And I think whenever I cut back, some of the texture of it sort of dissipated. And one of the things I love about that scene is the chasm, the chasm that exists between the two of them. The absolutely unbridgeable chasm, and her strength, and the fact that she's made a decision, and his, his.. I think one of the things I admire about Leo's performance in the movie is his ability and willingness to be weak, which I think is a great, one of the most difficult things for particularly leading actors, and particularly Hollywood movie star leading actors to have, to allow themselves to be weak and vulnerable like that. And I felt that that was something he did brilliantly in the film; I think it's a really underrated performance I have to say. And yeah I think it's got many things about it that I feel very, very proud of. And I think that you know what happens next is unbearable which is when she, the kids are playing at a friends' house and she calls and says, "Just keep them for the afternoon," because she probably knows that she's going to die, and it's pretty intense.

BH: You were revisiting, it's obviously very acute watching *American Beauty* and this back to back, there are a lot of similarities in terms of the sort of disintegration of a marriage. Were you very conscious that you were kind of revisiting those themes?

SM: Yes, I mean I thought very hard before doing this one because I felt, and you know American suburbia and I felt there were certain things there were certain things that… But again I brought some of what I'd learnt, or I thought I'd learnt in *Jarhead* into the way we shot the movie. Instead of shooting it in sets we shot it on location, we were trapped in a very, very small house. We shot almost entirely in continuity, which is very unusual, so by the time they got to the end it was like a pressure cooker. And it was a very, very hot Connecticut summer, very oppressive. It was weird; it was a weird experience shooting the film for so many different reasons, obvious and not obvious. And it felt like a very different shoot, so it felt like a different world. And I think that you judge stories from their externals at your peril, you know I think they're tonally very, very different films.

BH: How much did you think about the fact that you were reuniting Leo and Kate after all those *Titanic* years?

SM: Yes, well I mean I was reminded about it every day.

BH: But how much of a responsibility is that? How much do you worry about what an audience is bringing?

SM: I didn't actually, but I felt it after we released it. It was freighted with a kind of you know, "Oh here they are again," you know. And I felt it was, I mean I think if, timing is a lot with movies right, I mean *American Beauty* was perfectly timed for its place in time in the world. It was you know, it was the end of the millennium, Clinton was, you know there was an obsession about older men and younger women in the era of Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. It was post-Columbine, everyone was obsessed with what weapons were being made next door. But it was pre-9/11, it was still.. I fear that had it been post-9/11 it would have been seen as a very navel-gazing movie, a very self-obsessed movie, but at the time it was perfect. I felt the same a little bit about *Skyfall*, which was that it came at absolutely the right time. You know Bond had parachuted into the Olympic stadium with the Queen and the whole thing was, it was a sort of fever of, you know, nationalism and feeling good about the country, and it was just well timed. *Revolutionary Road* was absolutely the worst possible time. It was the middle of an economic crunch, you know people were really worried about where their next dollar was coming from in America, and there was a story about two very good-looking people living in a nice house, you know obsessing about whether they were going to move to

Paris or not. It was just a badly timed film, but actually, and on top of that it was freighted with these sort of you know award expectations because of who was in it and who had made it and all of those things. But I think if you get past all that, and one of the nice things about movies is that you can and you do look back with some sort of greater knowledge you know several years later, I think what you see is actually a really well-made film with very truthful performances in it. There's a great performance in it as well, there are several, but Michael Shannon is brilliant in it as well, and he's gone on to great things since then, but that was really his first major screen role.

BH: One of the most notable things you see about this film is what the characters don't say as opposed to what they do say.

SM: To me the best moment in the scene is when he's drawing his little picture of an early computer and her eyes stray and she looks at him with such desperation, and such a sense of what is unspoken. And you know, I like that moment very much.

BH: Sam, you've made seven films but you chose a clip from six of them, chose us to see six of them. The one that's missing is the one that came next.

SM: They told me I could only have six clips.

BH: Oh did they? I thought it was something really big and significant that you'd left this one out.

SM: So I had to orphan one of my children.

[Laughter]

BH: Tell us about the child you orphaned then.

SM: Yeah, I love the child I orphaned. No, the child I orphaned is a movie called *Away We Go*, which I made almost immediately after *Revolutionary Road*. And it was a complete reaction, it's a companion piece in a way, and again a reaction in a way against the movie I'd just made, which I felt was very, very hot house, very pressured, for all sorts of reasons. And I made a kind of, I got sent a script by Dave Eggers, the screenwriter, the novelist and his wife Vendela Vida, who are great people and people I admire hugely, not just for their writing, but also for the way they live their life and a whole set of beliefs about the way they view art. And I loved the script, and I thought, "Why not?" It felt like a kind of book of short stories after working on a novel. It felt like I had lightness and freedom, and it was funny, and it felt more like the world I wanted to live in rather than the world I was running away from. As a relationship it had honesty and a lightness to it, and a sense of not being confined by expectations or what society expects relationships to be, but simply to be. And it also tried to capture that wonderful and perfect moment when, if you're ever lucky enough to experience this, your partner is pregnant with your first child. And you're on the cusp of everything changing, and it's a magical and terrifying moment in your life, but it's only transitory, and it captured that very beautifully, and it was based on Vendela herself being pregnant the year previous. And all the advice her friends had given her, all differing of course about how to be a parent, how to bring up kids, you know and all the bullshit that's spouted about parenthood. And I thought it was something I just loved and I wanted to do it, and I had a great experience doing it, it was very freeing to do it after *Revolutionary Road*.

BH: And then you couldn't have made a more different step next, when of course you became the director of the next Bond. That seems the most bizarre step I've ever imagined, presumably it wasn't as linear as that, kind of one discussion was going on while the other was sort of concluding. But tell us about the process of you getting involved with Bond because it just seems so unlikely.

SM: It's interesting what you said in your introduction, you said I became the director of the Bond franchise, and I didn't become the director of the Bond franchise, I became the director of a Bond movie. There's a big difference between the franchise and a movie.

And I kept saying throughout the whole process, and I've said this about both movies, "I'm just making a film." Who plays Bond, who plays Bond next, who used to play Bond, which the best of the 23 movies is, that's nothing to do with me. I just want to make a great movie; do you know what I mean?

BH: It is now.

SM: No but it isn't, I mean it's in a sense not because you know this is my… My way in was Daniel; I mean I've never made any secret of that. Daniel I cast in *Road to Perdition*, I'd known him for ten, fifteen years. You know they called me to say, "We hear there's rumour that Daniel Craig is going to be cast as Bond," just before *Casino Royale*, "What do you think?" And I said, and I'm on record as saying, "I think it's a terrible idea," because at that point you know Bond for me was Pierce Brosnan and Roger Moore. He was a kind of urbane; you know slightly kind of eyebrow-raising cool, but slightly detached figure who dealt mostly in irony. And you know Daniel, whereas Daniel was all truth and reality and intensity and toughness, and I felt, I didn't see how the two could go together. But of course as soon as they did cast him and I saw the movie I thought it was thrilling and it reminded me of what it felt like to see the early Bond movies with Sean. So for me, my way in was Daniel, and I was trying to find a way to come back to England, I felt I wanted to make an English film and I also wanted to make a film on a large scale again because I hadn't for a while. And I went to a party in New York, we were living in New York at the time, and there was Daniel, it was always lovely to see him, I'd just seen his play that he'd been in with Hugh Jackman a few weeks earlier. And he'd had a couple of drinks and I said, he'd just made *Quantum of Solace*, and I said, "So who's going to do the next one?" And he said, "I don't know. Why don't you do it?" And I honestly had not thought about it until that moment. The moment he said it I thought, "Yeah, why not?" And I remember just going over it in my mind thinking, "Is there a catch? Is that a terrible idea? Is that the right or the wrong thing to do?" But every time, the more I thought about it the more I thought, "There's something to do here. There's something I feel in tune with, him." And hearing him talk about it really got me engaged. And then it grew from there. Barbara Broccoli and Michael Wilson came and found me in New York, took me out to lunch and asked me why I wanted to do it. And I think I said something like, "I want to be the coolest dad in the school," or something like that, which was partly true as well. That was the other thing, I wanted to do a movie that my kids could see, because I'd made all these R-rated movies with scenes like you know, featuring their mother killing herself, so there's a bunch of stuff that they couldn't really witness, and in fact they still haven't seen. But I thought you know it's time to do something that's just completely and utterly different and challenge myself in a different way. And so crafting the screenplay of *Skyfall* I found myself steering the writers, who are all brilliant, into writing a movie about someone who goes away from England and comes back to find that everything has changed, which really is in a sense what I'd gone through. And forces them to explain and define why they are who they are, and why they do their job, and what the point of Bond is, and by inference what the point of MI6 and the whole Secret Service is. And beyond that, what's the point of Bond movies? You know that felt like the debate that was going through my head when we were making *Skyfall*. And we had a very, very wonderful stroke of luck which is that, well in retrospect it was a wonderful stroke of luck, at the time it was a pain in the neck which is that MGM went bankrupt and we had nine months downtime when we weren't officially allowed to work on the film. So everything stopped except the work with the writers, and we spent nine months going down various blind alleys with the script and with the story, and gradually the story emerged. And it takes that long, and one of the other things I found frustrating about *Spectre* was that I didn't quite have the amount of time I wanted, you know because of obvious pressures you know. They need a movie every two or three years you know to fulfill the studio obligation, and I understand that, but it's still tricky, and we had, we didn't have that problem

with *Skyfall*. We had a script; we started with a script that was very complete. And I think this scene is the scene where Bond has decided to go back to, to take M back to his childhood home in Scotland and see the house for the first time, and for the first time since he was a child.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

BH: I think it's fascinating that you chose that clip because it refers back to something that you just said, which was about you're not directing a franchise, you're just directing a movie. And I wonder whether there's ever a point with a Bond film where you're literally just directing a film, as in getting the right performances out of actors, or whether there's always the kind of weight of you know the stuff that goes around it. But this is a scene that's exactly just that, it's you and…

SM: Yeah, I think I, yes there's a lot of stuff. I mean you know I call it the white noise and it goes on all the time when you're making a Bond movie, and you know I think it's partly you know your job to cut it out from your own immediate environment, but also to help the actors get away from it as well, because they're constantly being reminded of other versions of these stories. And you know what happens I think with larger movies now is that you're in a dialogue with the audience from a very early stage. You know your audience is commenting on and reviewing the title, you know the press conference, the casting, the song, the trailer, the second trailer, the poster, and it's a constant dialogue that goes on for 18 months. And so you have to just create a world around the camera which is absolutely private, and that doesn't matter whether it's the largest scene in the movie or the smallest, you can only shoot one thing at a time. You know you can only point the camera in one direction at a time, concentrate on what you're doing and push everything else away. And it's an act of will, and you have to be very, very strong, and you have to be very hard with your rules. You know I didn't read, I've only just started reading the papers again now after 18 months. You know you don't read you know social media, just cut off, because otherwise it does genuinely affect what you're doing, because there's opinions out there all the time. And if people, for example, guessed from the trailer, guessed the plot, you know or guessed the story, it's very, very difficult because you're still making the film. I mean these trailers are being cut while you're still shooting, so you've got to try and find a way to isolate yourself, and at the same time help the actors find the truth of what you're doing, which is really all you're looking for ever. If the script's any good you're just trying to find some base level of truth, whether it be a fight in a helicopter or you know someone punching the shit out of, two people punching the shit out of each other, or somebody revisiting his childhood home. It's just a character you know, you're not on a crusade about the character in other films, just in this one.

BH: but presumably there's all the noise, not just from the people out there, us, giving our tuppence-worth about what you might be doing with our precious Bond, but there's all the people who are involved, the writers who have a big stake, producers you've already mentioned. I mean how did you, how do you navigate the kind of your own vision when you've got all of those kind of potentially opposing views on the other side.

SM: Well the writers I think are you know not, look film is a director's medium. You know if you want to work in a writer's medium, go and do a play where the writer can… I say to David Hare or to Harold Pinter or you know Stephen Sondheim, "Could you cut those last two pages of dialogue," they'll tell you to fuck off you know. And you go, "Fine, absolutely fine," and you put on the play that they wrote. If I say we're cutting two pages of dialogue on screen, we're cutting two pages of dialogue. Deal with it, let's work it out, let's work out how we can reshape the scene. You know you have to be the leader, you have to lead the set, and you have to lead the writers because they don't know what the movie is. The movie is eight months; you're in the depths of the woods. The

only person - and I truly believe this, certainly with a big film - who has the whole film or some version of the whole film in his head is the director. And everyone is looking to you for that level of leadership, and you have to describe what it is that they need to do. And that goes for the producers as well, the producers are just below you in the sense that they can see what you're shooting, but Barbara and Michael who by the way are brilliant hands-off producers. They both, they know when to get involved, but most of the time they trust you and they leave you to your own devices. If they have a problem they'll come and say it. But most of the time they've got so much else to deal with, you know at any one moment in *Spectre* for example, I mean I was in Mexico City shooting a sequence that you'll see I think in a minute, and at the same time second unit was in the Alps finishing off a road chase. And I was watching you know on an iPad shots that they were doing and trying to talk to Alex Witt the second unit director on the phone while there were two helicopters in the air. I was shouting over the noise of two helicopters, and at the same time there were three sets being built back at Pinewood, and there's an aerial unit also shooting in a different part of Mexico a different helicopter, because some of the stunts we were unable to do them in the high altitude in Mexico City. So you've basically got five or six units all working flat out, all desperately needing answers from you, and you know in the case of the Alps they were losing the light and they had put the camera in the wrong place, and I needed to tell them they had got to move the camera you know before they lose the light, at the same time as shooting. Now that is just, it's a version of insanity by the way, it's very difficult to do what I just described doing, which is I just concentrated on one thing at a time when that's going on. But you know the producers are also dealing with all of that. You know at the end of the day you need to be very, very clear about what you want and you have to keep going until you have it. And there are many times also when it's tricky because you know you've got huge crews, they want to get home to their wives and family, you've done a stunt that you've been building up to for six hours, it involves explosions and all sorts of other shit, and you, it goes well and everyone's cheering and high-fiving each other and you look at your six monitor screens and you think, "That's not the shot. That's not the shot. That's not, nope, we haven't got it." And you have to say, "Stop, we're doing it again," and every single person on set is looking at you like they're going to kill you. And you have to be willing to be the person they're going to kill, okay, because that's part of also being a director. You know you're not saying it to be cussed, because you haven't got it. You know that the body shape that's he making as he jumps looks fake, you can see the wire pulling on his, no CG in the world can change his body shape, on B-camera the explosion has obscured him so you can't see him properly. You know all these things that go on go through your head. Where's the shot? Where's the shot that's going to carry it? Where's the shot that's going to convince me and the audience that this is actually happening? Because you know that's the other thing, you've got a baseline that you want which is that only use CG and computer-generated image to supplement the real, don't try and create anything from scratch. Which is you know, a) what Bond has traditionally done, and b) also my belief in how to make films. So there's that going on as well. So you know, there's a lot happening all at the same time.

BH: We're going to have a look at a lot happening in a minute with your final film. Let me just ask, in my real life I'm Director of Film for the British Council, I spend a lot of time thinking about what makes a British film the image of Britain that we give you know through our cinema. I'm really struck by the fact that you as a Brit have spent most of your life doing a view of America, Americana, you know kind of suburbia or war or military or whatever. With this one you came back here to make your version of Britain, but it's a sort of international eye view of Britain, it's not a sort of real version of what our national characteristic is like. Did you have much conversation about the kind of, you know the British identity that comes out of a Bond film, or the way that's palatable for an international audience.

SM: No, you don't, you're not trying to package Englishness, but at the same time you have to be aware that Bond, right back to Fleming, you know is aspirational. You know Bond is about travel and glamour and you know, and opening an audience's eyes to the wonders of the real world and the places that you can indeed still go. Now that has been devalued now to a degree now that travel is so easy, but also that other worlds can be created, no-real worlds, you know that… What's the interest in the desert when you've been to Middle Earth and you've been to Hogwarts and you've flown on a broomstick and you know you've travelled through space you know to the Death Star, you know is it really interesting to be in the Sahara anymore? But you have to reinvest those places with some level of romance and passion, and believe that the real world still holds wonders and you know, and I think wonder is an important word. But you know I don't think anyone goes to a Bond movie for the quote unquote real, you know it's always had one foot in the real and one foot in the fantasy. It's about a tone; it's about walking that knife-edge between the two. Because one step too far to the right and you're in Marvel world now, and one step to the left and you're in Bourne world. But Bond cannot walk with us; it does not walk in the street. Bourne will walk with; Bourne can disappear in Waterloo station, no problem. Bond can't do that. You know he has, he travels with a sort of force field around him. You can put him in the real world but for a very brief time, because he loses his power. Because ultimately these movies are mythology, you know it is one of the great contemporary myths. It's lasted over half a century, there's a reason for that, there is a need for that degree of mythic storytelling. And I made movies in America because America still has, even now in a contemporary world, a mythic landscape. But there is also mythic English landscape, it's not real, but it is somehow tonally in terms of its spirit very close to what we feel. And there are moments, I mean God knows you know I'm not talking about scenes on Westminster Bridge, I'm talking about there are moments in *Skyfall* for example when M is quoting her poem and Bond is in Whitehall when you feel close to an idea of Englishness. There's one shot at the end of *Spectre* of a Union Jack fluttering over Whitehall, which is rather ragged and has seen better days, which feels like England to me. Those are the places that I put what I feel, little moments where, well it's still sad on some level, and yet we're still here. You know we don't have what we used to, and yet some of it remains. And M has a line, Ralph's M has a line in *Spectre* you know when Andrew Scott's C says to him, "Face it, you don't matter anymore," and M says, "Maybe I don't but something has to." And that's the way I feel about this country sometimes, and a lot of that has gone in there along with my concerns about post-Assange world that we live in in *Skyfall* and we were obsessing about three years ago, and the post-Snowden world we live in now, which is why we put all the stuff about surveillance into this movie. So you know there's enough I think, I hope, of the real political landscape to inform it, but at the same time you have to, you're telling a wonderful piece of escapism too and you have to embrace that part of it.

BH: Meanwhile let's see what you made of Mexico. This is *Spectre*.

SM: You can see it in the cinema but you can't see it here.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

BH: So how many days did you close down Mexico City?

SM: Oh gosh, well we were there for about two weeks I think. And one of the things, the reason I chose the clip, obviously it's one shot and it's, what is it, four minutes or whatever. And when I decided to do another Bond movie I had to sort of look at the first film, I looked at *Skyfall* and thought, okay, well what do I want to do differently and how do I want to change things? And one of the things I felt with *Skyfall* was the first ten minutes felt a little relentless. It felt through-scored, it felt lacking in rhythm, and I said earlier one of the things that defines, I think for me, one director from

another is their sense of rhythm. But I feel like one of the things you get for free with a Bond movie is the first ten minutes. You don't have to explain who your central character is, you don't really have to explain the tone, you have the ability, the chance to drop an audience right into the middle of something and tell them nothing about it, and they'll, there's ten minutes free time. So not only do they know the actor, they know the character. There's a great Hitchcock line, they used to ask Hitchcock, "Why do you always cast movie stars? Why do you cast Jimmy Stewart and Cary Grant?" And he says, "Because it saves me ten minutes of exposition. Because the audience know Cary Grant, I don't need to explain Cary Grant, he's just Cary Grant." I'm already on board, I'm with you. And that's something you get with Bond which you would never have with another movie, where you're not having to introduce the world. And I wanted to do something that had a different kind of rhythm, that shifted rhythm within these ten minutes. Now this obviously I'm very proud of it technically, but really its job is to reel you in gradually, gradually, gradually, show you the world, gradually get closer to Bond and then zero in on what he's looking at. So in a way it, and then of course it all goes haywire. There's a gun battle, the building collapses, there's a chase through the streets, there's a huge fight in a helicopter, but all of which shifts a rhythm. There's source music in there, not only the drums but everything that you hear is timed to the source music, from the dinging of the elevator bell to the sound of the door closing, to the hurdy-gurdy in the streets, to the distant cries, everything is pitch-shifted so it feels, it's all part of one musical fabric, sound and music alike. The music was composed by Tom Newman, recorded by local Mexican artists, played live in the streets. And then what you get is over the top of it you then get the Bond theme coming in, wheedling its way, easing its way in. And then you get sections of it that later on where we drop the sound out completely. The first part of the helicopter fight is just the sound of the helicopter, then the score comes in. So what you're doing is shifting rhythms within it, shifting perspectives, and tonally moving things around, and that's what I hope you do across a whole movie. A great movie breathes in and breathes out, a sequence breathes in and breathes out. And that's a long, so the way I look at that shot is it's a long inhale until bang, the whole thing goes off which is the bit obviously you don't see. But in terms of actually the high spot of shooting the movie, that was it, because it doesn't just depend on the coordination of 2000 fully costumed extras and you know Daniel walking at exactly the right speed and the camera operator. But also stuff like going, really there are morphs in that shot that blend one shot to the other, so when you walk into the lobby of the hotel you're walking into a hotel that actually isn't there, it wasn't there, it was further down the street. When you go into the hotel room you're going to Pinewood, when you come out of the hotel room you're going onto a rooftop in Mexico. Not only a rooftop in Mexico, a rooftop with 350-feet of track and a techno crane you know and God knows how many crew manipulating that so that we see everything beyond, including the musicians and the maquettes and the giant puppets that were made by the good people of Mexico City. 2500 people working in tandem at the same time is a really big high for a director, when everyone gets it right it's very exhilarating. And it's not just for the director, for the crew as well. You have people who have been on crews for 40 years who have made 14 Bond movies saying, "I've never seen anything like this," and that was really exhilarating for me. And that I thought you know, I looked around on a couple of days of Mexico City and I thought, "I'm never going to do this again. I'm never going to see this kind of thing again. I'm just going to soak it up," because it is amazing when you see it. And the analogy I use is a surfing analogy, you know when you're trying to catch the big wave you get wiped out a lot, but when you catch it you'll happily get wiped out another ten times looking for that high that you feel when everything goes the way you imagined. You sit in a room and you imagine a city, you imagine a South American city, you imagine these people, you imagine this celebration, and then through the hard work and brilliance of so many

thousands of people you can realise it. It's a pretty amazing job to have and a very, very wonderful privilege to be able to do it, and to know that an audience will also come and see it too.

BH: Let's go to our audience now. We have just a few minutes for a few questions; we have mics on either side. I can see a hand up there; let's have another one on this side. At the back there, one down here and one at the back.

Q: Thank you. We've heard you talk wonderfully about all the different elements in filmmaking, in your filmmaking: the music, the action, the cinematography, the script; all these wonderful elements that you marry together to produce this wonderful cinema. Can you talk a little bit more about how you actually work that process, when you bring the composers in, how you orchestrate that? Is it different for absolutely every single film, or do you actually have sort of a formula of the way that you like to pace things?

SM: Well I've actually developed a thing that I do now; I do two things that are very particular to me. One is I do a read through and I rehearse, right. Now there are many great directors out there, I can think straight away of Woody Allen for example, a man who's been responsible probably for more great performances in his movies than any other director in the 20th Century, has never rehearsed a day in his life. So there are many ways to do this, but I like to rehearse. For me it's partly getting myself going, but also knowing that me and the actors are on the same page. The other thing I like to do is I call all my chief collaborators into the room and I do a thing I call 'The Look of the Picture Meeting'. And it's three days, and it's the heads of all the departments, so it's my costume designer, production designer, cinematographer, often the camera operator will be there, composer, my sound team, etc., etc., etc. So there's 30 of us in a room, and you'd be amazed, because normally the composer never meets the cinematographer, and the cinematographer never meets the sound team, because they're in different parts of the process. And your job is to make the movie five times, really. You make it when you cast it, it's made when it's written, it's made when it's shot, it's made when it's edited and it's made when you compose the music. And you can fuck up the movie at any of those points, okay, but you can also, and you can't, you have to get all of them right really, ideally in an ideal world. But what I do at that point is I just describe the movie that I want to see, how I want it to feel, how I want the light to be, how I want the costumes to look. Many, you know we'll show storyboards and we'll show animatics, we'll have production designs, everything available to us. And we'll just sit there, I'll go through it, it's very laborious, one day you know we'll probably cover 30 pages of script. But that's how, and everyone from that moment on is making the same film. And to me that always felt like a necessary, but I started doing that with *Road to Perdition* and I've done it every time since, and I love it, it's almost my favourite part of the pre-production. So that's how I bring everyone together, or try to.

BH: Somebody at the back there had the mic, yeah.

Q: Hello. Oh, hello Sam. I saw that like you spoke about being able to improvise with your actors, do you feel that that was influenced by your theatre background, that you'd be able to trust actors in playing around with the script, because you spoke about if you felt that dialogue was not necessary you'd cut it out, but with the actors you seem to be more free, let them be more free with the roles. Do you think that's because of you know your theatre background?

SM: Yeah, I think, no, not necessarily because of theatre. I feel comfortable with actors, I've always felt comfortable with actors, I've spent most of my life with actors, but I was very struck when I was making *Spectre* by an interview I watched with Steven Spielberg, an old one which I happened to see on TV. They're rerunning South Bank shows and there was an interview with Melvyn Bragg in which he said, "The *Indiana Jones* movies, you know we made a lot of it up on the day." And you know you have to, there's a great James Brown

phrase, you know the singer, "Keep it loose but keep it tight," and you know that's kind of a great way to view filming. You want the tightness of the crew, you want everyone to know exactly what they're doing, but then when it comes to the moment you have to be free. So you have to give them the feeling that anything is possible. You can always steer them back to doing what you originally thought. Nine times out of ten if you get it right what they'll come up with is much more interesting than anything you could have thought in the first place. That doesn't mean constantly improvising, and there are some scenes which I say to the actors, "Do it word for word. Please do not change anything." For example, *American Beauty*, there were scenes like the one you saw which we improvised on, but a lot of the time I was saying, "Please, it's a really great script, don't mess around with it." So it depends, it depends from movie to movie a little bit as well.

BH: We've got time for one more, there. You sir.

Q: Good evening Sam, first of all thank you so much for this wonderful presentation and for all of these amazing films you've given to us. And I have to say, I think many people are of the same opinion, I believe *Skyfall* is the best Bond film ever made, I think it's the perfect Bond movie, hands down.

SM: Thank you.

Q: I would like to know what's the next production you're working on, what's it all about? And also I would love to know whether possibly I could be a trainee assistant director.

[Laughter]

BH: Brilliant.

Q: Voluntary, voluntary, trainee assistant director on your next amazing piece of work. Thank you so much.

SM: At least you're honest; I mean I like the direct question. You're not really interested in the answer to the first question are you? First of all, thank you all for coming out, I'm very, very touched and delighted that everyone's, that the place is full and thank you for listening to me waffling on. The thing I'm working on next is a large holiday, and you know I've been basically with the two Bond movies and the two theatre productions I did in between working for five solid years and I need a break. So something will emerge probably within nine months' time. And the answer to your second question is, you know, join the queue.

[Laughter]

But no, the answer to the second question is genuinely, it's incredibly important, I think there is an absence of proper training for directors, and I think that there is the great phrase Peter Brook, the theatre director has, which is, "The only way to become a director is to call yourself a director and then persuade everyone else that that is in fact the case." Because you don't have a certificate that says, "I am now officially a director," so a lot of it is willpower. And so doing what you're doing now is what you should do, which is just get out there and do it, and ask, and get involved, and be part of it. And so I applaud your hutzpah.

BH: And we had a reprieve, one final question here.

Q: Hi, I just wanted to ask a question about what you said about film being the director's medium and the relationship you have with the screenwriters. Did you mean to say that when you read the script, because the film is conceived first in the head of the screenwriter, that you help the screenwriter to achieve what he saw first the film to be, or that you read the script and you think maybe this is not achievable and I want to take it in a different direction?

SM: It varies very much. An original screenplay like *American Beauty* you have to respect almost as if it's a play. I didn't really, I changed substantial things in the edit, but I wouldn't really have, you know I didn't want to change it, it was great. But when you're working on a Bond movie you're working on a, you start with a blank sheet of paper, no one handed me a script for either of those

movies, literally there was nothing. So you're starting with, so you're guiding the writers, so of course you're going to say, "Yes. No. Maybe. Do this better." It changes from movie to movie. The one thing I would say is, you know you have to have a clear idea of what it is that you think that overall the film should feel like and be. I think that is your job and your responsibility as a director is to have the wholes, to keep holding the whole movie in your head, and remember that probably at the end of the day you're the only person who can do that.

BH: In this case you're the only person that can do that. Thank you so much, Sam Mendes.

[Applause]