

25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

Jeremy Brock: Good evening, I'm Jeremy Brock, on behalf of BAFTA and the BFI welcome to the second in our current barnstorming series of international screenwriters' lectures. Tonight, I'm delighted to be welcoming one of Australia's greatest living playwrights, author of *When The Rain Stops Falling*, *The Secret River*, and the multi-award-winning *Lantana*, Andrew Bovell is renowned as a screenwriters' screenwriter, one of those rare beings whose peers love and respect his work more than they envy it, for its power and fluency. Andrew's career as a screenwriter includes the adaptation of his extraordinary play, *Lantana*, a co-writing credit on *Strictly Ballroom* with Baz Luhrmann, the film version of *Edge of Darkness*, the thriller, and his adaptation of *A Most Wanted Man*, based on the novel by Le Carré. Andrew will lecture for about an hour, followed by a Q&A with film producer Tanya Seghatchian and then of course, as we always do, we'll open it up to questions from the floor. Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me enormous pleasure to introduce Andrew Bovell.

[Applause]

Andrew Bovell: Thank you. I've got a lot to say so I'm going to say it quite quickly, so I hope you can keep up.

Funny things happen to writers in taxis.

You know the story. A writer gets into a taxi and you establish the destination and it clears the airport and the driver asks the inevitable question "Here on business?" And you say, yeah. Hoping that will be the end of it but knowing it won't and he says "What do you do?" And you think about lying. What could I be? A teacher. An academic. A businessman. But you tell the truth and you say, "I'm a writer." And he says "Yeah? What do you write?"

And at this point in the conversation, I've noticed one of two things happen. If I say I'm a playwright the conversation ends there.

[laughter]

Usually with a look of disappointment. And pity. But if I say I write for film it's like a door opens. And the conversation really begins. This says something about the audience-reach of the two mediums. Taxi drivers perhaps don't go to the theatre – much. But everybody has a relationship to film. Everybody wants to talk about it. Everybody has an opinion. And taxi drivers being taxi drivers inevitably ask "So what films have you written?"

And your heart sinks a little because you've had this conversation before and you know how it ends. It's a test you see. Are you somebody? He's asking.

You mention a title "Nah, didn't see that one". You mention another, "Nah, didn't see that one either". You mention another and he says "Heard of it but, nah, didn't see it". And so you end up feeling like the screenwriter of all the films that nobody saw.

[laughter]

And so they go.... These conversations with taxi drivers. Even when you think you're somebody you just end up feeling like nobody. Better to lie perhaps. And to say that I'm a teacher. An academic. A businessman. A landscape gardener.

Sometimes, I wish I was a landscape gardener. Out in the sun all day, in a garden. Instead of a dark office, with the blinds drawn, the only source of light coming from the lap top screen. Empty coffee cups. The crusts of yesterday's sandwich. Unpaid bills. Notes scrawled on pieces of paper. And a line of emails reminding me that the draft was due last month.

Actually, I have been mistaken for "somebody" important in a taxi. Once.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

I was on my way to a funeral so I was wearing a suit and tie, which is unusual for me. And the taxi driver said. "I don't agree with what they did to you. Gillard and her mob".

[laughter]

And I think about it for a moment and I realise he thinks I'm Kevin Rudd, the ex-Prime Minister of Australia.

[laughter]

This was shortly after he had been deposed by his deputy, Julia Gillard. A piece of Australian history.

It's the glasses and grey hair, of course. With Kev and me.

My hair started to turn grey in my late twenties. I tell my kids it was their fault. It was the shock of them coming into the world. The shock of becoming a father. But it's not true. I think I went grey because I'm a writer and I worry.

[laughter]

The question is did I become a writer because I worry or do I worry because I am a writer. And essentially that's what I want to talk to you about today. The worry of being a writer.

And I want to speak frankly. I want to speak truthfully about this thing I do. About the worry of it and the joys of it. About the mistakes I have made and the things I have learned. About the things that can go wrong and the things that go right.

I want to speak to you about writing as art; as something that can provoke us to think about the world we live in and the values we hold. As something that reflects who we are and suggests who we should be. As something that gives expression to the great themes of the day and that makes sense of the world we live in.

And I want to pose this question: As screenwriters is that what we aspire to do, is that what is expected of us?

Or is our job just to tell a bloody good story with a damn good crisis and a redemptive ending, preferably with more than one action sequence? In other words, get over yourself. Your job as a screenwriter is not to make art... Go and be a playwright if that's what you want to do. Your job is to serve the director's vision and to help to make a bloody good movie which makes as much money as possible.

Art versus Commerce.

It is one of the great tensions in what we do. Are they opposites and enemies or can great cinema be a fusion of the two?

My story begins with a phone call... In screenwriting terms we might think of it as the disturbance. And it certainly disturbed me.

It's 6:30 a.m. I know immediately that it's my U.S agent Jerry Kalajian, a six foot six Armenian-American attack dog with a heart of gold who would walk over glass for his clients. But no matter how many times I explain that Australia is not on LA time he doesn't get it. For Jerry... there is only LA time. And he always calls at 6:30 a.m.

I answer my phone and reach for a cigarette. I can't do one without the other. But I am giving up smoking and they are not there, where they should be. And as Jerry speaks in a faltering voice and tries to sound calm, which is not easy for an LA agent... they don't do calm... but as Jerry is speaking, I keep reaching for my cigarettes even though I know they are not there. I even start to lift up the scattered pieces of papers on my desk... the fragments of screenplays, the unread articles, the unpaid bills, looking for cigarettes that I know aren't there.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

Because Jerry is telling me that the producers of the film, *Edge of Darkness*, which I have been working on for five years, which has dominated my life and the life of my family, which has caused my grey hair to turn white, and driven me to the edge of sanity... and I'm not kidding... sanity was a casualty... it is regained now... but I have stared into the abyss of break down because of this project....

And Jerry is now telling me that the producers have decided to bring on another writer.

And I am silent... until Jerry says, "For Christ sake... you're killing me. Say something." And so I say.

"Why?"... Two weeks ago we were going to make it.

Well two weeks is a long time in Hollywood and things seemed to have changed.

Jerry is talking again. He is saying they are bringing this guy on just to do a dialogue polish, to Americanise it and to locate it more strongly in Boston, where the film is set and this guy is from Boston. He knows it really well. Hell, he probably won't even take a credit.

I am mildly reassured. "Who is this guy?" I say.

"His name is Bill Monihan."

"What's he done?"

"He wrote *The Departed*."

"You mean *The Departed* that won the best screenplay Oscar?"

"Yeah... that's the one." And I'm reaching for my cigarettes that aren't there again because I don't know much but I know that you don't hire an Oscar-winning writer to do a dialogue polish and an Oscar-winning writer does not pick up someone else's work

without taking credit. I mean the guy does not need to ghostwrite for anybody.

And then I hear Jerry say something I will never forget. "There is no shame in this. This happens to every writer in Hollywood. From the lowest to the best. This happens to everyone." And I say "yes... but that doesn't make it right."

And when I get off the phone my hand reaches for the cigarettes that aren't there and I call Martin Campbell, the director of the film. And I like Martin. He has become a friend. We have eaten together and drunk together and told each other stories in Los Angeles and in London over several years and he has been supportive and patient and has fought for me all along the way and I say "Martin... what's going on?"

"There's absolutely nothing to worry about", he says. Martin hails from NZ and had spent most of his time since he was a young man in London until he moved to LA and became a director of large-scale action films, including *Casino Royale* and the *Zorro* franchise among many other things. I should also point out that Martin directed the original BBC television series of *Edge of Darkness* and this project is his baby and he has steered it through several sets of producers but he has always remained loyal to me and so I would go to hell and back for him... and if he says "There's absolutely nothing to worry about" I believe him.

But I say "Martin if you need to do this... if we have come to the end of some kind of road... then I understand. It's been great but hell I understand."

I'm lying of course. I don't want him to do this. I don't want to be replaced. The film means too much to me. And has cost me too much. The best part of five years and as I said before... my sanity. And Martin says emphatically:



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

"Monihan is coming on just to do a polish, to Americanise the dialogue and to locate it more strongly in Boston. Nothing will change. It will remain all your work. You are the screenwriter of *Edge of Darkness*."

There's no shame in this. This happens to every writer in Hollywood. I think to myself.

And so I get off the phone and I email one of the film's producers and I say I understand you're bringing on Bill Monihan. I've been told by Martin that it's just a dialogue polish. Can you clarify the situation for me?

And the producer emails back and says "Absolutely. Bill is just doing a polish to Americanise the dialogue. It is business as usual. There's nothing to worry about."

And I reach for the cigarettes that aren't there and I think to myself, maybe this isn't so bad. Maybe this hot shot Oscar-winning writer will come on and iron out the rough patches and give it a Hollywood shine. And at the same time I'm thinking it's the rough patches that make this screenplay what it is and Hollywood shine is the very thing I have fought against through the last seven drafts.

And I look out my office window, which overlooks a valley and several paddocks on our farm in Willunga in South Australia. And it's a long long long way from Hollywood. And it must have been spring because the Salvation Jane was in bloom. And for those who aren't familiar with Salvation Jane, it is also called Patterson's Curse...

I find it interesting why for some it was regarded as a salvation and for others a curse. But it proves that something can be both at the same time. Anyway, it forms a great carpet of purple across the valley and is really quite beautiful to look at.

But it's actually a noxious weed. And I leave my office and walk out into the paddocks and start to pull it out... plant by plant and it's hard to know what to think but I know

what I'm feeling. I am feeling ashamed. Like I wasn't good enough. And of course... this is ridiculous because like Jerry says, this happens to every writer in Hollywood so stop feeling sorry for yourself. It's just a dialogue polish, after all. But I keep pulling out the Salvation Jane, plant by plant until four hours later my wife, Eugenia comes looking for me. She is by now worried and she finds me there in the paddock still pulling out the Salvation Jane.

And I look back at what I have done and I have hardly made an impact. There is just a trail of dead plants but the sea of purple goes on and on forever. And anyway, everybody knows that the worst thing you can do for Salvation Jane is to pull it out. The only thing it does is to disturb the ground, which allows new seeds to take hold. You're just meant to leave it and let it die off naturally.

But at the time, this seemed to be the perfect image to capture my recent journey on *Edge of Darkness*. I had become obsessed and no matter how much work I did, I couldn't seem to make progress and the more work I did the more damage I seemed to do.

But my story doesn't really begin with Jerry's phone call, at all. That was more like the second act plot point - the turn in the script that moves us relentlessly toward the crisis. The story began much earlier so whilst Bill Monihan gets on with polishing the dialogue on my script I'll take you back to the all-important set-up.

It's 2002 or maybe 2003 and I'm a happy playwright bringing up three kids with Eugenia on a farm south of Adelaide. And I've recently written a film called *Lantana* and it has done that thing that we all hope our work will do. It has connected with an audience and broken out. And after doing very good business at the Australian box



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

office it has played at several festivals and been sold into the European and the all-important American market. And I'm sitting back enjoying it all from a distance, thinking what would be next when the phone starts to ring.

Would you like to adapt Arthur Miller's play *A View From the Bridge* for the screen. Yes, absolutely. When do I start?

Would you like to adapt Pat Barker's novel *Border Crossing* into a feature film? Well, yes. That sounds alright.

Would you like to write a feature film based on the last ten days in the life of John Wilkes Booth, the man who assassinated Abraham Lincoln? Well, yeah, that sounds interesting.

Would you like to adapt the Hideo Nakata film, *Chaos for the Sexy Beast* director, Jonathan Glazer and the Oscar-winning producer of *Traffic* Laura Bickford, for Robert De Niro and Benicio Del Toro.

So somebody wants me to write a film for De Niro. My head was spinning.

And it was that easy. One day a playwright with roots in left wing political theatre in Melbourne. The next an in-demand Hollywood writer. And it was all on the back of a relatively modest Australian drama. And what astonished me was that the distance between the two wasn't that great.

Hollywood was not the impenetrable fortress I had always imagined it to be. One success and the door opened and I stepped blindly through. Of course I had heard stories about what happens to writers with good intentions in Hollywood. I'd heard about the inevitability of selling out and compromising your high artistic values. I had heard the stories about writers being burned slowly over hot coals, of lives wasted and talent squandered but hell here was the chance to write movies. I knew exactly what I was getting into.

Or did I?

But the phone call that really made me stop was the one from Martin Campbell asking me to adapt Troy Kennedy Martin's 1980s BBC Television series, *Edge of Darkness* into a feature film.

And of course I knew the series. It was a seminal and influential piece of television that did what the British do so well. It was a sharply observed political satire that exposed the hypocrisy and illegality of the government of the day whilst telling a profound story about a father's grief.

I loved it at the time and held it up as a benchmark for good writing. And it remains that for me. And now somebody wants me to adapt it. As I said... My head was swimming.

But why me, I asked.

"I have just watched your film, *Lantana*. And you're exactly the writer we're looking for. Someone outside of the Hollywood system who won't be a slave to plot and genre and who can write fucking good dialogue", Martin said.

And within a couple of weeks I was on a plane to Los Angeles, flying First Class. Hell, I hadn't even flown Business Class before and after the first glass of champagne and the tasty little treats I knew I was ruined. How would I ever fly Economy Class again? Maybe I wouldn't have to. Maybe this is my life now. And so I made out that I belonged to that rarefied world at the front end of the plane, along with the rich American retirees and CEOs of major international corporations and the odd famous person and I ate some more of those tasty canapés.

But it was as if God, if he exists, or she, if she exists, saw the glimmer of hubris and struck me down. You see I have this weird allergy to turkey... of all things. I can eat other sorts of birds but I can't eat turkey. Something to do



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

with the hormones. And about 45 minutes out of Sydney just as I'm settling into my first film on the extra-large personal screen I feel this terrible cramp in my stomach. And I know this cramp. I've had it before. So I reach for the menu and sure enough there it is, 'Pheasant Paté'.

And I realise that it's not only turkey that I have a problem with.

And so I spent the bulk of the next twelve hours in the toilets heaving from both ends, often at the same time and believe me, in that state it doesn't matter what class you're flying.

But finally to LA, that city I know only through the movies and where I was met and driven to my hotel in a large black car with tinted windows. And what strikes me immediately is that there were two Los Angeles. The Los Angeles I was seeing out the window, black, Mexican and Hispanic. And poor. And the Los Angeles of the film industry. White and very, very rich.

And at the hotel which was this chic little joint on Wilshire Boulevard, chic as only LA hotels can be, I was met by a lovely young woman who said welcome to Los Angeles Mr. Bovell and she put an envelope in my hand. "You per diems, Sir."

Thank you very much, I said. Per what? Yeah, I was that naïve.

Once I got to my room and settled in I opened the envelope and there was two and a half thousand US dollars in cash inside. And the exchange rate at the time was about 52 cents so I was holding about five grand.

I had never held five thousand dollars in cash before.

And I immediately thought of home... of the mortgage... of the unpaid bills... and of the many friends, many of them writers who lived

on the smell of an oily rag or worse. Who couldn't pay their rent.

And I just felt guilty. So I put a couple of hundred into my wallet. Enough to get by and decided to take the rest home. But what to do with the cash. I'd been told never to leave valuables in your hotel room in Los Angeles. It's the Mexicans, someone told me. You can't trust them and they know how to get into the room safe.

And I thought about the Mexicans who cleaned the room and who were paid about \$1.50 an hour and whatever the guest was prepared to leave on the bedside table and I thought, well if that was me being paid that, I'm not sure you could trust me either.

But I took the money down to the lovely blond haired blue-eyed Californian girl on the desk who you could trust absolutely and gave the money to her. Could you put this in the safe for me? "Certainly Mr. Bovell..." And she counted it and gave me a receipt, which I put into my wallet. "And you have a nice day, now" "Thank you, I will."

And then on the day I was due to leave I went back to collect the cash, of course and presented my receipt and it was duly handed over. And I got back to my room and counted the cash and there was only six hundred dollars there.

Hmm... I thought.

I returned to the desk and explained the situation and that there had been some kind of mistake. "I don't think so, Mr. Bovell". And she presented me with my receipt and sure enough it said \$600.

I had not checked it. I simply trusted the blond haired blue-eyed American girl and put the receipt into my wallet.

I had been scammed. LA style.

It would have been safer to leave the money with the Mexican maid.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

I had been an idiot.

So lesson number one to new writers travelling to Hollywood. Trust nobody. And don't be an idiot.

But I was in LA of course to meet Martin and the film's producers. And Martin had a suite of offices at the old MGM studios, which were now owned by Sony. And even though it has become a Disney version of a Hollywood studio you could still feel the history of the place and I had to admit, it was buzz to be a part of it.

This first meeting was with Martin, and Michael Wearing, the producer of the original TV series, who like Martin would become a good friend over the coming years. David Thompson, head of BBC Films who were partners in the project was also there... or at least he was on the loudspeaker and finally there was Dan Risner, an old school Hollywood producer who had been around for a long time and who had seen it all before.

And I liked Dan a lot. After the first draft he said "Love it. Now let's make the fucking thing." And after the fourth draft he phoned me in Australia and gave me some good advice, which I didn't fully understand then but which now makes a lot of sense to me.

He said, you know, this film is ready to be made. The script won't get any better and if you keep working on it you're just going to go backwards. His theory is that too many drafts kill a film and you just go round in circles, changing things just because you can and you end up close to where you started.

And I didn't believe him at the time. I'm an obsessive perfectionist and it's very easy for me to unravel my own work, which is what I did over and over on *Edge of Darkness*.

But I'm jumping ahead of myself. Essentially I was meant to go into that meeting and pitch for the film. But I don't pitch well. And I had no idea if they were talking to other writers or not. I found out later they were but then I didn't know that. So I didn't realise it was a competitive situation. And I'm glad I didn't because the pressure would have been too much. I just would have said give it to the other guy. I'm going back to the farm.

So I didn't pitch... and I think they were a little surprised. But what I did instead was to talk as thoughtfully as I could about the story and the people in it.

And I think they were relieved to hear this Australian guy talking about this imagined film without the usual packaging of the Hollywood pitch because what a pitch does is to reduce something down to its simplest digestible form where for me it was about opening it up to its widest possibilities.

But after we had talked for a good hour or so, about the politics of the film and its genre and what it meant to re-locate a work conceived and made in Thatcher's England to Bush's America, I talked about what really mattered to me. I said this is a film about grief. This is about a father who loses his daughter in violent circumstances and doesn't understand why. And he feels guilty because every bone in his body tells him that he should have been able to protect her. And he couldn't. He couldn't save her. And that's his emotional dilemma. And I have a daughter. And I just couldn't bare it if I lost her. I think I would go crazy.

And I could see it in their faces. I had clinched the job not because I impressed them with my understanding of structure or genre or the politics of the piece but because I understood the emotional terrain of the film. I understood the emotional experience that would be given to the audience, and that's what they wanted. That emotional understanding.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

Martin took Michael and I out for dinner that night and the beginnings of a friendship were formed. But never make the mistake of thinking that a good friendship will save you in Hollywood. The film will always be the thing that matters.

But I remember that night because Martin and Michael told me a lot of stories about making the original series. And in those days the BBC handed over the money to maverick producers like Michael and let them get on with it. And they were flying by the seat of their pants, making it up as they went along.

Troy hadn't even finished the script when the cameras started to roll. He had done the first four hours and they were brilliant but he was yet to deliver the final two. And then he disappeared.

Under immense pressure to get it finished he had locked himself in a motel somewhere. And when Martin and Michael finally tracked him down, desperate for the script, they had to force their way into the flat where they found Troy, near collapse and quite barmy with pages of script all across the floor. And as Martin wrestled with Troy, literally, Michael crawled around on the floor gathering whatever pages of script he could and when he had enough pages he said, this will do... we'll shoot this.

And they left. And I laughed at the story at the time, at the madness of it.

I didn't know then that I too would end up on the floor, mad as hell with scattered pages of the script all around me... screaming I can't do it. I just can't do it.

Once I got home from Los Angeles the challenges of the adaptation quickly became apparent. How to take six hours of story and make it work in two. Not only was a shift in time required from Thatcher's England

to Bush's America, a radical shift in culture was required. The British tongue-in-cheek irony of Troy's work was not going to play well in America.

Being an ex-spy Troy had knowledge about how clandestine government operations worked. I had no idea and I had to find out quickly.

But the greatest challenge was the question of plutonium. In mid-80s Britain, with the Cold War still in play just the mention of the word conjured the very real possibility of nuclear war. The word itself had power. And the premise of the series was based on the illegal manufacture and storage of plutonium in a private facility in the north of England. This was actually happening at the time and it was highly illegal and it was being done with the full imprimatur of government. So the series had that extra edge of exposing a highly classified British secret.

And like most classified secrets in Britain everybody knows it's happening, everybody knows about them, but nobody really talks about it. But Troy did and it was sensational.

But by 2004, plutonium had lost its edge. The Cold War was over. America had prevailed. Everybody had plutonium, everybody was making it and besides it had never been illegal to do so in the US. Hell... they were making it legally and supplying it to the rest of the world.

And this was the biggest challenge.

Everything to do with the nuclear and weapons industry in the United States was legally sanctioned if not openly examined. So whatever plot I could develop ended up having that 'so what' factor. Everyone knows that America's doing that.

Somehow I had to go deeper into clandestine American activities and find out what was really going on. But that takes time.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

That takes influence. That takes connections. I didn't have any of those things.

What's wonderful about America is that it is full of crazy people with the wildest conspiracy theories imaginable. But I was determined to keep it real. It would be easy to write the film about something that wasn't happening. Hollywood does it all the time. I wanted it to be about something that was happening. In other words I wanted it to be true. The models were *Silkwood* and *The China Syndrome* and *All the President's Men*. I was consciously reaching back to the great political American films of the 1970s and early 80s.

Over the following months, I spoke to FBI agents, anti-nuclear activists, nuclear scientists, whistleblowers and lobbyists for the nuclear industry and slowly a picture started to evolve. And it was frightening.

America is caught in a trap of its own making. The weapons industry is indispensable to the economy and it wields enormous political influence. Lockheed Martin, Honeywell, Halliburton with its connections to Dick Cheney, Raytheon, Northrop, Boeing, the Carlyle Group, the Pentagon. This industrial-military complex maintains significant facilities in every state of the Union. And if ever the political system moves to control its power it simply threatens to close these facilities impacting upon a state's economy and unemployment levels, ensuring that a Governor or Congressperson that presides over this situation doesn't survive long. And to make sure of their position they generously fund pro-nuclear and pro-military candidates. They make sure their people are in power.

President Eisenhower warned against it in 1961. Bernie Sanders is standing up against it now. And will he change it? I doubt it. Money delivers power. That's democracy in the United States.

But that's enough of that. Suffice to say that the research on this was fascinating and the plot, as it developed, revolved around the collusion between private industry and hawkish sectors of the Bush regime to develop a new and secret nuclear weapon and to create the political circumstances in which they would be justified to use it. Remember, I'm writing a film about something that was happening. This was not a fanciful conspiracy. Step One: Convince the world that a perceived hostile state is developing nuclear weapons and could use them against us... the Christian West. And the rest is history.

The first draft took me about six months to research and write, and finally it was delivered.

And I was now on my way to London to discuss it with Martin, Michael and David Thompson and Jamie Laursen from the BBC.

The strength of the first draft was that I had wrestled the material into the shape of a feature film. It now looked like a film and not a television series. It had a taut and gripping first act that would hardly change over subsequent drafts... it had a cumbersome second act with some good scenes and a third act that required Craven and the infamous Jedburgh to break into a nuclear facility in order to find the proof that this weapon existed. It didn't work and it would continue to trouble me right through the writing process. Just as the last act of the TV series had troubled Troy.

But I learned something important in London.

After delivering the draft I wrote a comprehensive set of notes deconstructing my own work and laying out what needed to happen in the second draft.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

Perhaps I did this to pre-empt criticism but it worked. There were twelve people in the script meeting... our *Edge* team had grown and all the money people now had several people on board. I had flown from Australia for the meeting and several people had flown in from LA. And Martin began it by saying... Well I think Andrew's done a terrific job with the first draft and you've all read his comprehensive notes so we should just let him get on with it, don't you think?

And there was general agreement around the table. And that was it. The meeting was over. Of course all Martin had done was to clear some space so that he and I and Michael and Jamie could get on with the more concentrated and detailed work that was required.

In the Australian film industry and perhaps here as well, I'm not sure, I think the tendency is to deliver the script and then to wait and be told what is wrong with it. And if the script development is being funded through a government agency then we are told by various project officers and external assessors what is wrong and what needs to be done. And these people are intelligent and their advice is often useful but it can also distract and derail and confuse and take up a lot of time. And this is an incredibly powerless position for a writer to find him or herself in.

It doesn't work like that in Hollywood. They are paying you a lot of money because you are expected to be the one who knows... they are paying you for your expertise.

And as the writer you have to know what the problem is and what the solution is. Of course you always listen to those you trust in the process... particularly the director and the producer.

But my advice to writers working in Hollywood is to never go into a meeting without being ready to lay the solution on the table. They are paying you for your ideas

and you better have them. Never allow a void to open up around your script because a lot of people in Hollywood are clinging to their rung on the ladder and they will rush to fill the void... to be seen as the one who knows. And so the danger is that they just make shit up, that makes them look good and you look like you don't know what you're doing.

And the really smart guys, the top producers are actually too busy to really grasp what's needed and so they hire other people to tell them. Well don't let them. You be the one to articulate the problem and identify the solution. That's your job.

Hollywood despises a writer who doesn't know what to do. They fire them and get one that does. Or pretends that he or she does.

London was a productive time. And after our work Duncan Heath, Martin's UK agent, took us all out to dinner at the famous Ivy restaurant. And this is where I first met Troy. And to tell you the truth I was rather shy of him and unsure what to say. I'd had my hands inside his head and been messing with his sublime work. He had not read the draft and was perfectly charming. But it was difficult for us to find common ground. And I think this distance was probably a natural state of affairs between the writer of the source material and the writer who is adapting it.

But then he did something that surprised me. He showed up at my hotel on the night I was leaving London and gave me two recently published books criticising Tony Blair's role in the Iraq War. And he had written a little note on a card to go with them wishing me the best for the journey ahead.

I appreciated this enormously and I think the gift of the books meant more than I first realised. I think Troy was trying to tell me that I should be looking at the conduct of the British and American governments in the



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

lead up to the Iraq War... It was there that I would find my clandestine collusion between government and private commercial interests.

And Troy was right given what we came to know. The war was based on a false premise. There were no weapons of mass destruction. We had been lied to. And the people who lied to us acted with impunity and profited from the lie. And the resulting chaos in the Middle East continues to make the weapons manufacturers substantial amounts of money. But I was on a different path at that time – plutonium – and by the time I realized what Troy had perhaps been trying to convey... the politics had moved on.

And that was one of the great challenges of writing this screenplay. The politics were changing fast. 9/11. Afghanistan. Iraq. North Korea. Iran. Hell, it took less time for the American government to invade and occupy a country than it took me to write the second draft.

But back to The Ivy for a moment when I glanced across the restaurant to see Harold Pinter and Antonia Fraser quietly enjoying their meal.

And I was struck by how frail he looked.

Along with Arthur Miller, Pinter had been an enormous influence on me, as he has been for many writers. His work taught me about subtext and the powerful use of silence and about the rhythms of the spoken language. Recently he had delivered his courageous acceptance speech for the Noble Prize for Literature. It had reminded us that as writers we had a duty to expose the truth.

I wanted to go over and thank him, for he had articulated what so many of us had been thinking in that dark time. I didn't of course. I didn't feel it was my place to interrupt his dinner and impose myself.

I regret it now and think about how lonely celebrity must be. Even for a playwright. He died two months later.

I went mad writing the second and third drafts. I don't know what happened but I reached my own edge of darkness.

You might think that with experience, the art of writing a good screenplay will get easier. But strangely, at least for me, the opposite is true. The more I know about it the more difficult it has become. It is almost as if I know too much. And knowing too much can paralyse you with self-doubt because you know when you're getting it wrong. You know when it's not good enough.

And that's deadly... that voice in your head that is telling you it's not good enough.

When I began writing, and I knew nothing I felt free. I knew none of the rules and anything was possible. I took risks, probably without even knowing that I was doing so. And the risks paid off.

Lantana for instance was written entirely in ignorance of plot point one, or two, or any others for that matter.

There is a kind of courage in ignorance or lack of experience and one of the great challenges we face, I think, as we develop our craft is not to lose the courage and spontaneity you had as a new writer.

So I stood on the precipice of madness. I was 45 so perhaps it was just the proverbial mid-life crisis. And I'd had a few knocks.

A View From the Bridge had fallen into limbo. *Border Crossing* too had fallen by the wayside as a film with a similar premise had been released. And *Chaos* had taken a weird turn. Jonathan Glazer, the real reason I had agreed to do it had left the project after making *Birth*. And I was left with a Hollywood studio executive making enthusiastic noises



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

about making the film if I could re-write it for a younger actor. De Niro had long gone and according to this executive, Benicio Del Toro was no longer hot. No, he wanted me to re-write the film for a younger audience, which meant a younger protagonist, someone like Jake Gyllenhaal but not Jake Gyllenhaal... the next Jake Gyllenhaal. And if you knew the story, which is about a middle-aged guy in his forties, you would know how crazy this was but I rebuilt the film around a young guy, the next Jake Gyllenhaal, returning from the Iraq war and halfway through pitching this idea to the studio executive I said "I'm sorry. But I can't do this. You should find another writer. Perhaps the next Andrew Bovell because this one's had it."

Perhaps I wasn't that brave but the effect was the same. I walked away from the project.

But I was still writing *Edge of Darkness*. Or rather I was writing the first 30 pages over and over and over again. It was the most perfect first act ever written but for the life of me I could not get beyond it.

I guess I had writer's block and for those of you who have experienced it, you know how debilitating that can be.

Martin was in Prague making *Casino Royale*, so Michael Wearing came out to Australia to talk me through it. And we drank a lot of red wine and I made him help me pick our olive crop and then he went back to England and I continued writing the first 30 pages again and again and again.

By this time the film was about a clandestine plan to smuggle a dirty nuclear bomb into Iran and to set it off at the nuclear facility at Natanz and then to blame the catastrophe on the Iranians thus justifying a US invasion.

Such a plan or something similar actually existed but you can understand that the film was starting to push beyond the bounds of credibility.

And then something shifted, or rather lifted.

I think it had something to do with my children. The older ones were becoming adolescents and they needed a father in the house. Not a neurotic writer. And my youngest kid... I don't know what it was but he just loved and loved me... like he could sense I was in danger and so he just kissed and hugged me out of depression. He used to walk at my side and he needed to have a part of his body touching mine all the time. I thought it was because he needed reassuring. Now I think it's because he at seven or eight intuitively understood that I was the one who needed to be reassured. And he made me laugh. He cracked me up time and time again and with the laughter the depression and the writer's block started to lift.

But it was also about money... Things were lean on the home front and the only way I knew how to earn a buck was to write and so I pulled my finger out and wrote.

And suddenly the fourth draft was done and delivered.

And then Martin was on the phone. "About fucking time, Darling." He occasionally called me, Darling. "And it's brilliant," he said. Suddenly a new producer was on the scene. None other than the Oscar-winning producer Graham King.

And I am back in first class flying to LA. Though avoiding the pheasant paté.

Now Graham King is a little scary. He's a great guy from the East End of London with big hands that could crush you.... Maybe... if he wanted to. But he loves the script and he knows how to make a movie in Hollywood and the word is that Mel Gibson has read it and is interested in playing Craven.

And so Graham puts the hard word on me. You've got Mel Gibson wanting to do this film so how quickly can you do the next pass.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

And I say how quickly do you want it and he says "Yesterday."

And I say right. The thing is I have this theatre workshop I have to do when I get home... for a play. And he says cancel it. And I say I can't. It's been scheduled for six months.

And he gives me a long, long look and I nearly break... I nearly say... ok, I'll cancel it or I'll pull out of the play project and just as I'm about to say this he breaks first and says ok but straight after that.

And it's back on the plane. And I do the workshop, which is like a creative blood transfusion that leads to the play *When the Rain Stops Falling*, which was eventually produced here at the Almeida... and I remember that I'm not a movie writer at all. I'm a playwright who somehow got caught up in the crazy film business.

When the Rain Stops Falling opens on an image of a man screaming and a fish falls out of the sky and lands at his feet. Hold onto that image because I will eventually get back to the fish.

But for now I finish the workshop and do the "Mel" pass.

And I wait and I wait and I wait and then the call comes from Martin. Get on the next plane. Mel wants to meet. So I'm back on the plane to LA... but I'm in Business Class and "Oh God, it's the beginning of the end." They have downgraded me. But the next day I'm in a meeting with Mel Gibson and Mark Gooder from *Icon* with Martin and Graham. And other people and they're keen. But Mel thinks the stakes need to be raised.

And my heart cracks a little. Because I know where this is going. And when we workshop that idea a little more we drop the Iran idea and we drop the whole nuclear backdrop and we come up with a plot that has clandestine elements within the US

government plotting an act of terrorism on US soil with the intention of framing terrorist elements abroad and thereby justifying Bush's absurd war on terror and subsequent US foreign policy.

The only problem is that Martin and I don't believe such a thing is credible, and Mel does. And on the surface it seems like a good Hollywood plot. But that's exactly what it is. A Hollywood plot and that was exactly the kind of thing I had been trying to avoid.

I had always fought for the film to be about something that was happening in order for it to be politically relevant. It seemed that truth would be the casualty.

And when Martin and I had time to reflect on this, to his credit he backed away from this idea but we had to come up with a scenario that was true but that also addressed Mel's and Graham's concerns of the stakes needing to be raised. In other words... my low burn style wasn't going to cut it.

And the pressure was now on. We worked for two days and nights and then presented the new idea to Graham and his fellow producers. They seemed to back it. They seemed to like it. And then Graham reminded me the US writers' strike was due to start in three weeks. If the film was going to go then they would need the script before that.

I said I could do it but secretly I shuddered. I was dealing with a whole new political backdrop to the work and I was meant to be working on *When the Rain Stops Falling*. It was due to open in February at the Adelaide Festival and the director would need a draft by December if it was going to be ready and it was October and I hadn't even started writing it yet.

I didn't tell Graham this though. I just said I could do it.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

And then something odd happened. Martin asked me to leave the room so that he could have a chat with Graham. And he'd never asked me to leave a meeting before.

And I knew it was over. I felt it in my bones. Somewhere along the way they had decided that I wasn't up to it and they were in there discussing contingency plans.

And I stood outside the building and rolled a cigarette and I thought... they're not taking this away from me. I've got three weeks before the strike starts. I can do this.

And I did. I wrote like a demon. I was the full catastrophe... the clichéd writer, writing day and night, living on cigarettes and coffee. Growling at the kids. And I could do that when I was 20 but it was taking its toll now. But I just kept reminding myself that this was a story about a man who loses his daughter and has to know why. And if he doesn't find out he will lose his mind. This was about a man going mad. And I was going mad at the time so really I knew something about it. And I finish it two days before the strike and send it.

Silence... one day... two days... a week. Then Martin calls and says he's happy but it's with Mel. I hear nothing from Graham's office so I email ask what he thinks.

And his words are chilling. He says "It's the best it's ever been." And maybe to some people that sounds good. But I knew exactly what it meant and it wasn't what I wanted to hear. Because he was telling me that it's the best it's ever been but it's still not good enough.

And then there's the strike and things go quiet for a long time. I give up smoking and I write the play. And a man screams, and a fish falls out of the sky, and I know I am that man now. But what does the fish stand for.

Then one day the phone rings. It's 6:30 am and I know it's Jerry because Jerry is on LA

time and I'm reaching for my cigarettes that aren't there and Jerry tells me that Bill Monihan is doing a polish.

But there's nothing to worry about. My agent, the director, the producer have all told me that it's just a dialogue polish. *Edge of Darkness* is your screenplay and it always will be.

And then there it was splashed across the pages of Variety. Oscar-winning Writer Bill Monihan on board for a page one re-write for the Gibson vehicle. It was a big story... and it didn't include me.

And I found out because of an article in Variety.

Hell, that's Hollywood.

Martin eventually sent me Bill's script. And it was difficult and strange to read it. Because it wasn't my work and yet it was... there were traces... it was like looking through the surface of something and seeing the shadow of yourself beyond it. It was like being painted over.

I was angry. I was upset. I emailed Martin and said that Bill has just pissed all over six years of work. All those great scenes. All those great moments. Those shocking reveals and Craven's terrible pain and grief as he came to terms with the loss of his daughter.

Gone.

I didn't hear back. I never heard from him again. I never heard from the producers either.

Gone.

I like to think that they were too ashamed to face me. But really... I think they just moved on. I think they had to. They had a film to make.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

Bill's script was slick and fast-paced. The writing was sharp. Polished. There was a clear sense of a three act structure and he hit all the right structural moments. And yet it read like many other American screenplays I had read. And it had lost many of the qualities that distinguished it from any other Hollywood thriller.

My script was dense and tried to convey too much information. Bill's script was clear but it conveyed hardly any information at all.

My script retained the essence of Troy's work and even some of his iconic moments including the infamous kissing of the dildo moment, for those who know the series. Nothing of Troy's work is retained in Bill's script or the eventual film, not even the central character's name, which had shifted from Ron Craven to Tom Craven for some reason.

My script was about a post-9/11 loss of confidence in what it meant to be American. Bill's script was a reassertion of confidence in America.

My script was about moral shades of grey. Bill's script was about moral certainties. Good and evil. Black and white.

In my script the protagonist didn't kill anyone. He solved his problems through his intellectual nous. In Bill's script he killed anyone who got in his way.

My script sought to deconstruct the ideological framework that had defined America. Bill's script embodied and celebrated that ideology, whether intentionally or not. That's just what those kind of movies do.

That the rights of the individual must be asserted over the rights of the group and that if someone does you wrong it is your right as an American to seek redress in any way you choose.

This is the very ideology that America used to explain and justify their response to 9/11. *Edge of Darkness* began as a critique of this ideology and ended up upholding it.

That's Hollywood.

And I would argue that that's the only narrative that the three act paradigm, that we all know so well and which has come to dominate the way we think about story in film, can tell.

It works but only if the message is straightforward and clear and maintains the status quo. And the overuse of it only serves to simplify complex story ideas.

And this is part of the reason why our focus has shifted back to television drama. Because it is here where complex and nuanced story is being told.

I don't blame anyone for what happened on *Edge of Darkness*. I don't blame Graham and the other producers. They had a movie to make. They had a responsibility. And I don't blame Mel. He delivered his customary strong and charismatic performance. And I certainly don't blame Martin who stood by me for so long.

I don't even blame Bill. His work may have begun as a dialogue polish. But I know what happens. I've done it. You change this. You change that. And then you need to change the thing that set it up and all of a sudden you're doing a Page One re-write. If I blame anyone, I blame myself. In the end I could not give them what they wanted and that was my job.

But when I finally read Bill's script and saw what it was that they had wanted I knew that that was not something I could give.

I wasn't that writer.

So who was I? Who am I?



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

I was at a writer's event back in Australia a few years ago and someone asked me what I was working on. As it happened was finalising the production script for *A Most Wanted Man*. I explained that it was an adaptation of a John Le Carré novel for the Dutch director Anton Corbijn, to be shot in Hamburg starring Phillip Seymour Hoffman among other wonderful actors. It was a great project to be a part of. And the guy I was talking to, a veteran of the industry, smiled knowingly and said, "Right, so you've become a gun for hire."

And I laughed and said, "Yeah, I guess I have." But as I was driving home that night I found myself thinking. Worrying. What does that mean? A gun for hire? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Is that what I have become? Somebody who just writes other people's stories. It had a slightly negative connotation. As though I wrote for hire, for the biggest bidder, like some paid mercenary who fights without thought of just cause. And just as quickly changes sides if the other side pays more. I didn't want to be that. I didn't want to be seen as that. And then it happened. A big hole opened up in the road before me. And I drove straight over the edge. Straight into the dark pit of despair. Screaming, Who am I? Why do I do this? I'm just a gun for hire.

I fell into film. I like to think that I would have found my way there eventually but I wasn't looking for it. I was in my 20s. A playwright living in Melbourne. A part of the Melbourne Workers Theatre ensemble. I lived and breathed theatre. I wore black and I smoked roll-your-own cigarettes. And I happened to have a play on in town. It was called *Ship of Fools*. It was about a busload of unemployed people sent into the desert on a work for the dole scheme. And Baz Lurhmann happened to see it. And the next thing I knew I was

writing an odd little film called *Strictly Ballroom*.

Now here's the thing. I was every bit the serious young Melbourne playwright and Baz was the opposite - the flamboyant Sydney director. How's this going to work? I thought. Well it kind of did, strangely, for a while.

The Melbourne Worker's Theatre, unsurprisingly, given its name was a left wing theatre company that began its life as a theatre project based at the Melbourne Train Maintenance Yard. It was a period of transition in the workplace as the conditions of workers were being eroded by the rise of economic rationalism. Sort of Thatcherism in Australia but it happened a decade later. Our job was to work with the workers in order to create a series of plays that gave voice to their stories and concerns in those tumultuous times. That was my training as a playwright. To give voice to the stories of others, particularly those who weren't heard. And I've never quite shaken that training. It still shapes the way I approach my work.

And suddenly there I was, in Sydney working on a film about ballroom dancing... How would I do this? From the Dickenson industrial world of a train yard to the glittering world of ballroom dancing. You could not find two more different worlds.

Except they weren't as different as you might think. They were both worlds that belonged to the working class. And then I knew what I had to do. *Strictly Ballroom* would be a film about class.

And so I presented my scenario to Baz. Scott Hastings, the film's protagonist, worked at a steel mill in Woolongong by day and he danced by night. The steel mill was threatened with closure. Hundreds of people would lose their jobs. The Union had lost the fight. And Scott, seeing the injustice of it would rise up and run for shop steward and take on the bosses and lead the workforce on a strike, which would somehow...



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

somehow... I hadn't quite worked that bit out yet - but would somehow save the steel mill and everyone's jobs... and he would do ballroom dancing at night.

And of course there was a really interesting parallel because as Scott became politicised at work he found the courage to take on the corrupt powers-that-be of the ballroom dancing world and to finally dance his own steps.

But that was the B story.

Anyway, in the film's climax the fight seems lost, the bosses will win, the steel mill will close and Scott has to make a brilliant speech to rally the workforce to the cause. The problem is he's meant to be at the final Southern District Championship ballroom dancing competition.

So he's making the speech and the workers are rallying. But they're calling his name on the dance floor. And Fran, his dancing partner, the multicultural duck who has turned into a swan, is looking anxiously at the door, tears in her eyes. And his enemies... Bill Hunter etc (who also happens to own the steel mill) are smiling smugly, triumphantly. But somehow... somehow... through the magic of cinema he makes the speech, changes his clothes and makes it to the dance floor in a brilliant slide across the floorboards to arrive at Fran's feet and they dance until suddenly there is silence... the baddies have switched the music off but somewhere in the crowd someone is clapping out a beat... it's his father.... Who is wearing blue overalls and is one of the steel workers who had agreed to capitulate to the bosses demands early in the film... causing a breakdown in the relationship between father and son... and then someone else is clapping... and someone else and Scott looks up to see an army of steel workers marching into the dance hall and clapping the beat, urging them on and

so they dance, and the music comes back on, and everybody joins the floor and...

Love is in the air.

And Baz, to his credit, to his great sense of collaboration, went with it, though sometimes with a slight look of concern, through one draft of 250 pages, through a second draft of 182 pages, through a third draft of 145 pages until he sat me down and he said "You know... I think this film is about ballroom dancing and everything you are trying to say can be said through the metaphor of dance."

And he was right. Of course.

Strictly Ballroom remains one of the most loved and commercially successful films ever made in Australia. And I was lucky to be a part of it.

Several years later, the juxtaposition between the world of a blue-collar workforce on strike and the world of dance didn't seem like such a bad idea, given the success of *Billy Elliot*. Ahead of my time, maybe. But good ideas are easy. Then, I simply didn't have the experience or the craft to pull it off. I was just too raw as a screenwriter.

I tell my kids that it doesn't matter if you make a mistake as long as you learn from it. It's a cliché but I believe it. Problem is I haven't always followed my own advice. I made the same mistake, many years later with *Edge of Darkness*. I over-complicated the plot. I drove a political agenda. It's the playwright in me. I look for the cause; for the thing that must be revealed. The wrong that must be put right.

I wonder sometimes whether being a playwright with those instincts is compatible with working in the film industry.



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

I think it is if you can achieve the alchemy between political context and the demands of good story, if you can set a story about human need and desire against the politics of the times. If you ask the question, what's going on in the world when this story happens? Because every story is shaped by the times and place in which it is set.

That is what we were reaching for in *A Most Wanted Man*. The film tells a story about a young man, Issa, who comes to Germany seeking refuge from the violence of his native Chechnya. But because of the mistrust that characterises the West's relationship to Islam since 9/11 we don't know how to read him. We suspect he wants to hurt us. Our fear of Islam has taken away our capacity to recognise innocence and genuine human need. We turn an innocent man into a terrorist because it fits the picture we have created since 9/11 of an ever-present enemy.

The question is, do audiences care about this nuanced balance between politics and the demands of genre? Are audiences interested in the more difficult subject matter, the more complex films? Does content matter?

A quick study of box office figures would suggest that they don't. Most of the audience continues to look to cinema to escape from the lives they lead, rather than to be confronted by them. They prefer Bond and Bourne to Hoffman's Bachman as their men of action. Largely, our audience seeks a vision of the world as it's not, rather than one of what it is. And I get that. But should we then write to that audience alone? The call from some quarters in the last few years has been that we should. Write films that people actually want to see, they say.

But what does that mean? Write films with happy endings? Write films about likeable people. Write films that give people a sense

of hope? Write films that last ninety minutes. Write fast films. Write genre. Kill people. Because audiences like that. Fair enough. But those films will always be written. The market demands it. And plenty of films that set out to do exactly that fail anyway. If we heed this call it is the films that don't set out to do that, which are at risk – the tougher films, the darker films, the quieter and slower films, the political films.

I am not interested in escaping anything. In the argument around whether the image of the drowned Syrian child, Aylan Kurdi, should be shown on social media, I was firmly of the opinion that it should. It happened. It's true. Images are powerful. That one shocked the West. Action followed.

I love a film that tells it as it is. I like a savage, brutal, miserable account of life. I quite like a melancholy mood. I'm not afraid of the dark. Of human failing. I don't always want to see someone win in the end. So many films scream... Cry Now. Cry. Cry. Cry. Most of the time it's too easy. I admire a film that earns my tears. And what makes me feel something more than anything is when a film reveals just how savage or banal life can be and that a human being can actually survive it.

It's why I like the much-debated ending of *A Most Wanted Man*. Bachmann screams with rage and despair and pure frustration at the utter stupidity and brutality, which has just been displayed and then the character walks out of frame to go on, to continue. That is his obligation as a human being.

Philip Seymour Hoffman delivered the moment and more. The script says Bachmann screams with rage. But his scream had so much more than that. So much more.

So I'm a playwright with a political impulse always looking for a way to land it in the



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

context of film. I've made mistakes and I've pushed the politics too hard but I am also guilty of doing the opposite and letting the politics slip away from a project, softening it on the assumption that a more palatable version might prove to draw a broader audience. In my opinion the more palatable version of anything never works.

As a screenwriter I pride myself on being able to work collaboratively towards realising the vision for a film.

I am often asked what is the secret to a successful collaboration. It's really simple. There are two points. The first is to say yes to other peoples' ideas. The good ideas will last and the bad ones will fall by the wayside naturally, but if you say no at the beginning the idea is never tested and you will never know if it would have flown and in the meantime you have silenced your collaborator. The second secret to a successful collaboration is not to seek to control the outcome. This one is a little more complex. A little more difficult. It requires trust. And confidence in the people you're working with and above all the capacity to put your ego aside.

This sits at odds with the idea that a film is the result of the sole vision of a director. Is it possible that in cinema we genuflect to the idea of the director as sole auteur too readily? And therefore that the director, feeling that the vision is theirs to carry alone, often fails to deliver it.

The alternative is to argue for the potential of a collective vision. A radical approach, perhaps until you realise that most television drama is actually the result of a shared vision; arising from the collective work of a creative team. And it's worth pointing out that much of the most interesting, the most compelling, the most ground-breaking storytelling for the past decade or so has been taking place on the small screen.

I wonder if it's time for cinema to recapture that ground. It's always regarded itself as the superior form. But it's time to take a lesson from the way television drama is created.

At the end of the shoot on *Lantana*, Ray Lawrence, the director, printed up a t-shirt for everyone involved in the film. On the front it said *Lantana*. And on the back it said, "A film by...." And then it listed the names of everybody who had anything to do with the film, from the director himself to the names of the catering crew, in alphabetical order. Fortunately I was quite near the top. It's a symbolic gesture but one that reflected the spirit in which the film was made.

Ray also chose not to have a possessory credit such as "A Ray Lawrence Film" at the front of the picture opting instead for a simple "directed by" in the end credits. Another indication I think of the spirit in which the film was made.

As the writer of *Lantana*, Ray and Jan Chapman, the film's producer, made three important gestures toward me. The first was to hold a reading of the screenplay with the cast for the crew and for everybody that had financed the film. It's not always possible but it served to share the story with everybody who was about to make it and therefore to give them a sense of ownership and investment in it and it was a mark of respect to the screenplay and to its writer. It said this document matters. The second was to ask me to be on set as much as possible, so that the person who knew the mechanics of the story best, its writer, could provide the solutions to new problems as they arose in the shoot. The third was to welcome me into the edit room. Not just welcome me but to recognise that my insights were of value. So often a screenwriter is only invited into the edit room towards the end of the process but unless you've seen the steps made to arrive at the point you are at it is very difficult



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

to deconstruct what's there in order to offer meaningful and effective feedback. You are reduced to simply endorsing what you see. Encouraging what's going on. You know it's a process; it's just that you're not a part of it.

I hold *Lantana* up as a model for a successful collaboration in film and I believe that the film's success reflected the way it was made.

Those of us who write for the screen are familiar with the argument that the screenplay is a blue print, the architectural plan for the film. It has no artistic value or point beyond that. Some of us might actually agree with it. I think it is that but it's not only that.

Architectural plans are more than a set of instructions. They contain a vision. So does a screenplay.

The screenplay, whether written for the big or small screen must capture the imagination and inspire the director and the other artists, particularly the actors. It must enable them to do their best work by engaging their intellect and their instincts. It must win the confidence of those who will finance it by being clear in its intent and sharp in its execution. It must carry the possibility of the film and evoke the experience that will be offered for its audience. It must convey pace and rhythm and tone. It must offer the most vivid images and reveal the complexities of human behavior not through the interior voice that's available to the novelist but through what a character does. What a character says. And what a character fails to say and do.

A good screenplay is like a fine poem where the maximum amount of meaning possible is expressed with as few words as possible. Where what sits on the page is the tip of the iceberg and the portal to the depth of meaning that is often left unsaid in order to

allow room for the camera to reveal what's hidden.

Often the best dialogue simply frames the moment. Writing a screenplay is about creating the space for an actor to fill. The camera is at its most revealing in the spaces between what is said, in the silence and stillness of the moments in between.

And of more and more interest to me as a writer is not what a character says but their struggle to say it. Their search for meaning in the words and actions they use to describe their world. Not so much what they convey but their failure to convey it.

That's art. That's literature. That's whatever you want to call it. But it's not just a set of instructions that may or may not be followed. It's an organic document that continues to change as the film is shot and edited. But I strongly believe that the vision of the film is to be found first in the words on a page.

So I'm in a taxi. And we've just cleared the airport. True story. And the taxi driver says, "Here on business?" And I say "yeah." And he says "So what do you do?" And I think about lying. I think about all the other things I could be. I think about that garden. But I say "I'm a writer." And he says "Yeah, what do you write?"

And I'm not up for the conversation. So I say I'm a playwright... I write plays. Thinking this will end it. And he says "Yeah? ... I saw a play once... Something about rain. Starts with this guy. And he screams. And a fish falls out of the sky and lands at his feet. I don't know what it was all about, but I liked it."

It's about survival, I say. The fish. It means you can survive whatever life can throw at you.

Thanks for listening.

[Applause]



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

Tanya Seghatchian: Andrew, thank you so much for taking the time to write such an honest and informative lecture for us. It's a real privilege when screenwriters come and talk to us and actually take the time to write a lecture, actually, because it is of course what you do. We then see the formation of a whole story and the acts within it, the wit, the engagement and, in your case, the absolute honesty and candidness that you've described to us.

Because we've got only 15 minutes left, I'd quite like to ask the audience – I just don't want to monopolise you – I'd just quite like to ask you to give me a show of hands if you've got questions so I can moderate how many I can ask Andrew myself or whether I should just keep the moments with him that I've got on the stage. So if you do have any questions put your hands up. Two mics, they can come through, and in the meantime I'll ask Andrew a few questions myself.

I want to start by saying you've described the highs and the lows, but there've been more lows there than highs if we're honest. Is that the story that you want to tell, or are you leaving out the best bits, where the pleasures are for you?

Andrew Bovell: I think the lows are easier to talk about and more interesting, but it probably also reflects that kind of preference for the dark. And I'm sure me standing up here talking about absolutely wonderful it is to see your writing realised by actors and directors and just how much fun the film industry is, and how lucky I feel to be a part of it, all of that's there and exists and it's true. But there's a tougher story to tell. And it's a particular story I think that represents the experience of the writer in this film industry. And I think we've got to put it out there, that this is about screenwriting, so I didn't want to back away from that.

TS: I'm really grateful that you did, not least because I've heard you give masterclasses

on craft before. And often I've found your willingness to share honest analysis, and craft skills, with an audience absolutely fascinating. I noted there you were talking about the producer telling you four drafts is generally enough and that there can be too many drafts. I wondered if you could just tell us how many drafts you think is an appropriate number if you're being analytical about it. If there's a difference between each draft, and what it is that each draft should represent.

AB: I think probably in the masterclass you're referring to you might have heard me talk about this a little bit. I feel there's sort of three stages to writing, and the first I kind of describe as being similar to the process of that of a sculptor, where one has a block of material and you're searching for the shape within that block of material. And if that's a piece of wood, then you work with that material. And if it's a rabbit you're trying to sculpt you work towards that. But along the way you've got to let the material inform you that it's actually not a rabbit, it's a duck. That process usually takes the first and the second draft. Quite often, the first draft can be brilliant, if unorganised. The second draft, for me, often undoes the brilliance of the first draft. So a good producer has to know that the third draft is going to be the best of both. But usually it's about two drafts it takes me to find out what the real thing is we're trying to make. And then that third and fourth draft – or just third, if you're really clever – is akin to oil painting. It's a process of layering, of building up your picture layer by layer by layer. And when you come to read a screenplay, you should be able to sense the layers of meaning within that.

Now when I say two drafts, that's a lot more for me as the writer. I'm constantly working it. Probably two times I would deliver to the producer. And then there's the sort of, I guess, final bit, which is another two passes, and that's about distillation, that's about ... it's a minimal form. It's not a novel, it's not a



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

short story. It's like a poem, you're trying to express the most meaning possible with as few words as possible. For those of you who are familiar with reading screenplays, you pick them up, and if there is a clean flow and layout of words on a page, you can breathe through it. But if it's great chunks of prose, you often get stuck and you lose the sense of rhythm and momentum. So those later drafts are very much kind of distilling it down to reflect the actual rhythm and tone of the film. And then of course there's always the shooting script. The final thing that needs to reconcile all the unfinished business.

So I don't know how many drafts that is, but there's three stages.

TS: I think it's the stages that I'm interested in, and I'm also interested within that, in exploring how you smuggle in the ideas. Because clearly you only say 'yes' to something that has some political relevance or context.

AB: It doesn't have to be political in the narrow sense of it. For *A Most Wanted Man* ... look, I think we're all trying to make sense of a post 9/11 world. We are re-casting the world, at the moment. We are creating a new story, and it's a fairly dark story. So for me, with the greatest respect to Le Carré, it's not the spying that got me in – though that is fascinating – it's not the world of espionage: it's the story of the young Chechen boy who's got nowhere to go, and thinks he's coming to somewhere safe, and finds himself in greater danger. That's the tragedy, that's the injustice, that's the reason to tell that story here and now, to a Western audience. The rest of it is really important too but that's the heart of it. So it's always about ... and that is political. But also a story about the breakdown of a marriage, there are sexual politics involved, relationship politics. But again I'm looking for the just cause, the thing that needs to be put right, the injustice that needs to be uncovered, you know.

TS: And in all honesty, in the 21st century, given the state of the market that we find ourselves with today, is the screenplay, is the cinema the best form for those kinds of conversations?

AB: I go back to how exciting cinema was in the 70s, for me, some films. That they could be substantial, they could make an impact, they could be part of the cultural discourse. Cinema's actually absolutely part of the cultural discourse. The kind of cinema that's come out of Iran in the last decade has completely allowed us to understand a very complex nation in a way that our media, elsewhere, has failed to allow us to do so. Yes, cinema remains an incredibly important tool.

That doesn't mean you can't make a beautiful little exquisite coming-of-age story, or stories of value and importance. It's got to be a diverse palate, there.

[Questions from the audience]

Q: Andrew, firstly thank you so much for the most extraordinary lecture, it was an honour to hear it. Thank you. You mentioned the distinction between playwriting and screenwriting. One aspect of that interests me. When you're writing characters. When I talk to playwrights they talk about characters discovering their own stories and allowing that to happen. The imperative of film and the commercial pressure on film: I'm interested in whether that is a restriction, and whether in writing in film you're able to make those sorts of discoveries or whether the three act structure reduces, and feels reductive.

AB: Yes, it does, to me. I constantly have to battle that. When I'm writing theatre, I don't know who it's about, and I don't know what it's about until you get to the end, and then you go back and go, oh, wow, this was about that? This person is this? So you are making discoveries that're much more organic. Of course, you think you know what



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

you're writing about when you set off, but it's like Pinter used to say, you start with a line of dialogue, the very first line of dialogue, and the rest of the play fell out from there. So it's a much more loose and organic experience.

Film's different. You know, most of the work we're doing now is adaptations, so that's a slightly different task because you already know the end, you already know the character. But in film, I feel like there's not the time or the space to discover who they are. You've got to kind of know it, because that's what's going to get you through the process, get you to the end. But it is a much ... stricter form. The boundaries of it I find crippling. But of course you're always searching for ways to subvert it, hopefully to come up with the idea that pushes out beyond those tight boundaries.

TS: And in terms of original ideas as opposed to adaptations, have you lots of those that you want to do on screen, or do you think with those ideas do you tend to do them as plays first, and if so, why?

AB: I don't know. Look. The idea of an original feature is really exciting. I think Nick [Hornby] was talking the other night, in his talk, he's always got the original one bubbling along but you're not getting paid for that one. I genuinely feel that there are great producers that I know, that I've worked with, that I could go to them and say, hey I've got this idea, and they would help me. Realise that they would give me the space and support. So I'm not quite sure why I'm hanging back. It's just part of what we were talking about then, it's theatre's a great opportunity to explore what the idea is, to discover the idea. So what I'm tending to do, I'm trying to keep one foot in cinema and one foot in the theatre. Theatre is all about original work that then may or may not become material for a film or a TV series. And in film, just because great producers plop great books in your lap and go, would you do this, and you keep going, no no no

no, I'm not gonna do any more adaptations, and then they give you a book you can't not do.

TS: I think the other thing that was very interesting about your description of *Edge of Darkness* and the genesis of that from the television series through to the film, and seeing the clip reel at the front, and seeing *House of Cards* reimaged, it seems as though we are cannibalising all our cultural forms one way or the other, but bringing a new edge of the time to them with each adaptation.

AB: It feels at the moment more and more so, and that we're in danger of constantly ... Look, it's a bigger risk to do original work. It's easier to sell work that already exists. We're trying to market, we're trying to sell to an audience, we know who the audience is for it. So there's less risk involved. And it's really important that we continue to nurture new writers to do new ideas in all forms. And we don't step away from that task.

It feels to me, more than in any other time, we're becoming self-referring, we're constantly referring to what we've already done, we're constantly looking for opportunities to market existing work in other forms. But then something like *House of Cards* happens and you go, well, it's worth it. It's pretty good, the original and the American version, they're pretty good.

TS: We've got room for one question from the audience if there is one out there?

Q: Forgive me if this is a bit repetitive, it's moving on from a similar question to the one you've just had. About what you were saying about architecture and the limits of structure, and how abiding by the rules, they're there but obviously there's so much more, correctly. And how in writing a play you don't necessarily do that but in film, in the screenplay, that you're bound by some of that. Do you start with structure? Do you apply the rules?



25 September 2015 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

AB: The two mediums treat time differently, if that makes sense. A film narrative almost demands the forward movement of time. The chronological unfolding of narrative, and a sense of momentum; a great pressure to keep moving that story forward.

Structure's really important because at the end of every scene you've got a hundred choices of where you could go next, so you need something to start limiting those choices. And that's what structure starts to be, it starts to be the template that you put over your work that starts to tell you where you need to go. You kind of intuitively understand it. And that whole idea of the three acts. The fact that you're trying to build towards some sort of big reveal, 30 minutes in, I know I scoff at it but it is really effective. You do need to turn your story at a certain point, you do need to surprise your audience, so those traditional structures help. It's just that I think we can get really lazy with them, and hang back from making other more complex discoveries.

Time in theatre is treated really differently, simply because you can move laterally through a story. It's much easier to move back and forward. It's a different relationship to time. You can have two events happening in different places and at different times on stage at the same time, so you can make really interesting juxtapositions. Film doesn't allow that. Yes, you can split the screen, you can be arty. But it tends to not allow for that 'beyond realism'. So easily, at least ... We've probably come up with a thousand exceptions. But yes, structure's really important. I've got a really structured, structural mind. I talk about things, usually work with producers and directors ... Poor Anton didn't know what I was talking about most of the time -

[laughter]

- but put up with me. But for me, I've got to know the boxes, the shape of the boxes, and

the arrangement of the boxes before I know what I need to put into the boxes. If that makes sense.

TS: Well I'm afraid Andrew that's going to be all we've got time for tonight. So I wanted to thank you for sharing your insights and wisdom with us and to say that I hope you're flying back in the right class

[**AB** – “Not quite”]

[laughter].

Thank you very much.

