

BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series: Phil Lord and Christopher Miller  
25 October 2016 at Princess Anne Theatre, BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly, London

**Jeremy Brock:** Good evening ladies and gentlemen, I'm Jeremy Brock. On behalf of BAFTA welcome to the fourth in our 2016 series of International Screenwriters' Lectures. So far, this our seventh year, we've had three extraordinary talks from Kenneth Lonergan, Maren Ade and Park Chan-wook. This evening we are utterly thrilled to be hosting as our closing night speakers the multi-award-winning writer-directors Phil Lord and Christopher Miller. Terrifyingly juvenescent and successful, their credits include 2009's *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, 2010's *21 Jump Street*, and the world-dominating behemoth of success that was 2014's *Lego Movie*. Steven King once said, "A tragedy is a tragedy. Any fool with steady hands and a working set of lungs can build a house of cards and blow it down, but it takes real genius to make people laugh." Tonight we welcome the genius of Christopher Miller and Phil Lord. Phil and Chris will lecture, followed by a Q&A with BFI programmer Justin Johnson, after which as always we will open it up to questions from the floor. Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me enormous pleasure to introduce Phil Lord and Christopher Miller.

[Applause]

**Phil Lord:** Oh that's too much. That's too much.

**Christopher Miller:** Hi, hello London.

**PL:** Do we have a title?

**CM:** Yeah, let's do it.

**PL:** There it is. This feels crazy. It feels crazy to teach a masterclass, because I think the idea of a master screenwriter seems bananas. Screenwriting is very mysterious, and if anyone calls themselves a master screenwriter they are about to write a terrible screenplay. So this is sort of like what we think screenwriters should look like, right? This guys looks great.

**CM:** He's got a typewriter.

**PL:** Look at that typewriter that he writes everything on. I think the brads, the brads are in the screenplay, right?

**CM:** Perfectly.

**PL:** You type it on the, yeah with the holes already in the paper.

**CM:** This is where you guys...

**PL:** For sure.

**CM:** This is where you guys are getting tonight is...

**PL:** Instead you're going to get these dudes. This picture is very glamorous, taken at a Planet Hollywood with like the eighth billed star of *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. And so we retitled this... Oh yeah, we were gonna...

**CM:** Ask an audience poll. Which is, how many of you sing and dance? Raise your hand.

**PL:** Show of hands.

**CM:** Okay, that's not great.

**PL:** That is a fairly anemic response.

**CM:** Not great, okay. Good to know.

**PL:** Okay, noted.

**CM:** We'll put that in the databank. Go ahead, so we now are going to retittle this thing which is called, 'Chris and Phil's BAFTA Non-Masterclass Regarding Writing Things Down For Money: A Rope of Sand'. Which was a title that I took a challenge in University to title all of my school papers 'Something Something Something: A Rope of Sand, and I did. And it always works guys, it can work in any situation, it's always, there's some tenuous connection that you're making.

**PL:** It's still going strong too.

**CM:** That's right.

**PL:** We tried to put this thing near the end of *The Lego Movie*, but it didn't...

**CM:** Did not work.

**PL:** The marketing department frowned upon it.

**CM:** Anyway, so.

**PL:** Yeah, apologies.

**CM:** Back to the idea of singing and dancing.

**PL:** Do you feel like it was because the slide was in the wrong order?

**CM:** Quite possibly.

**PL:** Did that happen?

**CM:** It's quite possible. Anyway the point is that you ask a bunch of Year Two students, how many of you sing and dance and everybody raises their hand, and you ask anybody 17 and older and very few people, some drama geeks will raise their hand.

**PL:** And when we started working on *The Lego Movie* this was a major question that we were asking, which is what happens between the age of seven and 17? Is it that you get super duper, you learn how to be embarrassed, right? When you're like four years old you don't know what that is, but by the time you like get to ten or 11, like you start to understand the social implications of telling a joke that doesn't land or having an idea that other people don't like. And the other thing that happens is you start to learn about the classics, you start to learn about masterpieces, and then you go from like this, like thinking that like anyone can be creative, to thinking that like creative people have to look real handsome and be really good at what they do. And we are here to dispel that myth if it hasn't already been dispelled by just our faces and general demeanour and lack of preparation.

**CM:** We're trying to demystify the idea of an artistic genius, the only geniuses that we know are people who really, really work really hard, work their butts off and try and make things better over and over and over again.

**PL:** So we are going to endeavour to teach you essentially everything that we know in less than an hour, which is very sad. We've been working together for almost 20 years and this is all we have to show for it, okay. So we're going to show you a few things, but just about

everything we know. Number one: make the stage directions very short. You want a lot of white space on the page. It makes these people that are reading scripts, they're reading sometimes five in a weekend, you want them to read it in 40 minutes. The reading experience is very important. The second thing...

**CM:** Thank you very much.

**PL:** That's it. That's all we have.

[Applause]

That's very bad.

**CM:** I've got one more thing which is very important to me, which is...

**PL:** We have another.

**CM:** One space after a period. If you put two spaces after a period, you are a barbarian. Don't do it. I know we said we like all our white space on the page, but not between the period and the next word.

**PL:** If you do that you're a waste of space.

**CM:** Exactly. Alright, I feel like you guys, we're already covered a lot.

**PL:** I hope you've got a lot of questions. Okay.

**CM:** Okay, we'll start with...

**PL:** We're going to think of more, we're going to think of more things that we know. The only way to do that is for us to start at the beginning. So this is like the first movie, okay? And what used to happen is like a shaman would like take you into this cave and you would probably be under the influence, and he'd show you these magical pictures and they would blow your mind. Like mind-blowing imagery, it would dazzle you, right? And this person would tell you this story, and it would, like these people 30,000 years ago, they believed that this was real, they believed that they were like seeing a real God or whatever, and they would tell you these incredible stories. I don't know what story this is; it doesn't appear to make a whole lot of

sense.

**CM:** It's a giant spider being attacked by a snake or something.

**PL:** But people thought that the shaman was like full of magic and he had all this magic dust. But the truth is that the shaman isn't doing the magic trick, you're doing the magic trick. What's interesting to me about this first you know stab at art making is that it leans on this innate ability that all human beings have, our brains, what separates us from the monkeys is that we have narrative, that our brain functions with narrative. So the first story probably went like this. Like, "Hey man, if you go over to that cliff you're probably going to die."

**CM:** It's a lot about survival. If you're gonna, "Don't eat those berries, the red berries, you'll die." "Don't sneak up on that weird spider thing or you'll die." It's a lot about death.

**PL:** But it's like the major technological innovation of this period. And so the reason we want to talk about this is, storytelling is an innate ability that all human brains have. And some time between the age of seven and the age of 17 we've sort of pretended that that isn't true. But the truth is, is that that's true and the audience is telling the story. The shaman or a screenwriter is only creating the conditions for an audience to project a story onto the screen. That is, that to us is what's essential about screenwriting, and we come from animation, that's what allows you to turn these inanimate objects into a parent and a child, right? And so that's what we sort of, yeah.

**CM:** You're projecting your own emotion onto these images, and you can be scared about you're going to die if you eat the berries, you can be excited, you can laugh, you can cry, you can be embarrassed, you can be inspired. And you're projecting all of that onto these images so that you don't, it's a safe space so that you can, you don't actually have to have the actual experience of dying yourself. You can go home, you experience that emotion, now you don't have to go cut yourself to feel something.

**PL:** So that's super important, right? Your job as screenwriter is just to like set these things up in just such a way that the audience without feeling dumb figures out the story on their own. There's another thing that is important about this, which is that anybody can do this job, if we haven't hammered that home enough. So we're going to show you a history of our personal failures, starting with our college experience where we met. We decided to do a contest which is, we're going to show you our student films, and then, and see who can stand watching theirs the longest. Okay, we spent like an entire year on these things, they're epic length for animation. You start it.

**CM:** Go on, you've got...

**PL:** Oh, I've got the clicker. Okay. Right there it is. Does it have any sound? Oh there you go. That parts okay. Okay, I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't.

**CM:** Okay, and this one is mine. Okay that's enough. Okay.

**PL:** Alright, so by some like accident of fate we got jobs, and this was our first job at Walt Disney Television Animation, and we spent a whole year trying to come up with hilarious Saturday morning cartoon ideas, and we failed, and nothing...

**CM:** The only thing that ever came out of it was this 90-second short which was ostensibly supposed to be educational content that was legally required by the network to show on television. And this never aired because it was not educational enough.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

**PL:** That's great, so they hated that. No commercial value whatsoever. Or educational value.

**CM:** So then we started working on a number of failed sitcoms. Each one got cancelled, sometimes before we even finished writing...

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**PL:** Right, we wrote a pilot that got cancelled before we finished the first act.

**CM:** And then we made this crazy show called *Clone High*, which was about clones of historical figures who go to school together and date and stuff, like Abraham Lincoln and Joan of Arc and Cleopatra and whatnot.

**PL:** And there was also this character who was like the clone of Gandhi, and we love this character because he was like, there was so much pressure to live up to like the great original Gandhi that he kind of like just flamed out and tried to become this aspirant party animal, which didn't go over very well in the country of India. He's like very famous there.

**CM:** So there was a hunger strike and our show was taken off the air. Another failure.

**PL:** That's failure number five, this is failure number four, five and six. And then this is, I think this is our, yeah, so this is an illustration of the fact that there's no overnight success, and one of our favourite animation directors is Chuck Jones, and Chuck Jones went to Cal Arts before it was called Cal Arts, and he had a drawing teacher that said, "All of you have 10,000 bad drawings inside of you, and you need to get them out as fast as possible." Which is basically that I think, especially young artists need to be very prolific, you need to make things and not be so precious about whether they're any good or not, because I have a secret for you, they're not good. They're flawed and you need to find out what the flaws are as fast as possible. So anyone can do this job, failure is inevitable, don't worry about it so much. So...

**CM:** Then we went to work on *How I Met Your Mother* which was not a failure.

**PL:** Not a failure.

**CM:** So we quit that job to go make this movie called *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*.

**PL:** This is the perfect Hollywood movie

because it's filled with incredible set pieces and has no story or characters.

**CM:** But it was a favourite kids' book of both of ours, and we thought you could do it as a sort of Irwin Allen style disaster movie, like *Armageddon* but funny on purpose was the idea.

**PL:** So we were like, okay, what are the characters in these movies? There's always a scientist, and the scientist is always tortured and nobody ever listens to him, so wouldn't it be neat to tell a story about him. So we started developing this character of Flint Lockwood, and the idea was he was a genius scientist who worked for NASA, and he had gone up into outer space to deploy this machine that was going to cure the world of hunger, and instead it messes up and gives everybody the hiccups. And when he gets back down to Earth he's a pariah and nobody wants to hang out with him, and he grows a huge beard and rolls around in a taco truck for years trying to like fix this machine from the ground. And we created this character that was pretty, had kind of a big chip on his shoulder and was obsessed with getting back on top, and was kind of unlikeable, and so we were fired about a year after starting to work on the screenplay.

**CM:** And the people who fired us then took our script and took out all of the jokes and left all of the gaping story flaws that were in our original script, exposing...

**PL:** And then they got fired. So our screenplay got two people fired, two sets of people fired, four people lost their jobs and it was our fault.

**CM:** And strangely enough...

**PL:** Yeah, strangely enough, they took the guys that got four people fired and they decided to hire them back again, and promote them in fact, and say like, "Why don't you guys come on and direct the movie?" So we got hired to direct a movie that wasn't any good because we had done a bad job writing it. And so the thing that we did, the very first act of our directorial career was to throw out our own screenplay and start

fresh. And one of the things that happens when you know you go onto a movie when it's in the middle of production, is people are super suspicious of you and they all had all of their own ideas about what the movie should be, and some of the folks got passed over for the directing job, and so it was a pretty hostile environment. And we panicked. They had this big meeting, they brought everyone in a room and they said, "Lord and Miller, like how are you going to fix the movie?" And we were kind of like, "It's our first day, we don't have our ID cards yet man." And then we panicked and we basically said, "Well what do you guys think?" And even though we didn't know it at the time that turned out to be a very important day, because instead of us trying to dictate to everybody what we thought the movie needed to be, we started listening. And that allowed all these folks on the crew who had, really smart and great filmmakers unto themselves, to tell us what they thought and to get out all of their ideas onto the table. It was really eye-opening for us because even though it's frustrating to hear people critique your own work, it was really healthy and we learned a lot about the shortcomings of the movie and how it could be better. So that kind of unlikeable character with a chip on his shoulder who we started with turned into more of a, the movie became about a gifted child in a small town that didn't have anybody to connect with.

**CM:** But it still wasn't engaging. It was lots of jokes, it was funny, but it wasn't, nobody cared. So we were almost re-fired. And so then we asked the chairman of the studio, "What do you want?" And she said, "I want a story." And we learned our second lesson on this movie, which is that movies are not about a person, they're about a relationship, all of them are about a relationship. And there are some central relationships in every movie, and that's what stories are. And so...

**PL:** So we had this peculiar situation where we had like spent so much money on the movie that everybody hated that they couldn't stop it. They realised that they would lose more money by shutting it down, and then they would be

blamed, than they would if they let us finish the movie and then they could blame us. So they let us finish the movie, it was like the most pathetic green light in the history of cinema.

**CM:** But we weren't allowed to sort of build any more assets. We had built all these assets for one movie which didn't work, and they said, "Okay, you have all these parts, and now you have to make a new story out of it. It was sort of like the old studio system when they would say, "We've got Douglas Fairbanks and a pirate ship, we need to make a pirate picture next week. Write us a script." and so that's what we ended up doing.

**PL:** So we had this character named, we just called him Tackle Shop Tim, and he was kind of like way, way, way down on the call sheet, he was like the 20th lead or something like that.

**CM:** There was a scene where Flint had to go into the tackle shop to get 100,000 feet of fishing line for a project that he was doing.

**PL:** And it was like the only scene that anybody liked because it was a really clear relationship. He walks in and there's like fishing line everywhere, and he walks up to this guy and is like, "I'd like to buy er, one million feet of fishing line," or something like that. And it cracked everybody up, and we said, "What if this guy was Flint Lockwood's father?" And so we took our stock players and like made the movie about this relationship, that Flint Lockwood was trying to make this invention in order to get the attention of his dad. And at the same time his dad was like trying to get the son to like join in the family business. And it seemed like a really heartbreaking relationship between two people who really care about one another, but just like misfire and don't speak the same language.

**CM:** And we had been resistant to like doing a father-son story because it felt overused, we've seen that storyline a million times. But the reason why it's overused is because it's really elemental, it's an experience, parent-child relationships are an experience that everyone has, that's happened

throughout human history.

**PL:** And your monkey, 30,000-year-old caveman brain understands that. And one of the things that has proven true in our career is that even if you take something that's as straightforward and classic as a father-son story, you can express it in a way that's totally unique to you. So one of the rules that we had on *Cloudy* was, as many times as we had to rewrite it, was it's never going to feel like somebody else wrote this, it always needs to feel like we did.

**CM:** And this was a scene, specifically was based on a conversation I'd had with my dad outside of the editing room where he was trying to send me a link on a webpage, and I had to talk him through how to drag the mouse across the screen. Because he was like, "I want to send you this website but it's got too many numbers and letters in it." And I was like, "Just click on the website and send it to me." He was like, "Aargh, it goes beyond the edge of the screen." "Well you can like just drag the mouse across." And it was 20 minutes of getting him to send me this link to a webpage. And so then we put it in the movie.

**PL:** But so you know then like the most unlikely thing happens in the movie which is that Flint's dad winds up giving him like the very pep talk that he needs to go save the day at the end, and one of the things that was really fun for us is this monkey thought translator is the thing that, while it turned out to be at the start of the movie it's the thing that turns his dad crazy, at the end it's the thing that's able to translate the ideas of his dad into loving thoughts that this son is dying to hear. And so it is the weirdest possible scene, and yet it's the most like red meat, universal idea. Which is like, 'all I want to hear is my dad tell me that I'm great'. We just found a super unique and strange and I think like partial to us way of expressing that.

**CM:** And we learned that if you care then the jokes are twice as funny as if you're not invested. And so, feelings sell movies, and movies are relationships. But not just the relationships that are on screen, movies are relationships because they're all collaborations. No one's

making a movie in a vacuum. And just like on that first day when we said, "What do you think?" we kept that idea up the whole time making this movie, and listened to people because these movies are for audiences and they're made by big groups of people and good ideas came from all over the place. For example...

**PL:** We had this scene that in the book, this is basically a frame from the book which is that there's folks overlooking this beautiful valley with this beautiful jello mould, and we created this whole scene that takes place on this hill, and it was hilarious. And the poor story artist had drawn it like 18 times and spent more or less a year colouring things in with like a yellow highlighter, and then our editor...

**CM:** Bob Fisher.

**PL:** Bob Fisher, who's like a real taciturn guy, like saw the scene and he was like, "I want to go inside that thing." And we were like, "What happened to Bob?" And he, so he wanted to go inside the thing and we were all like, slapped ourselves in the forehead and said, "That is a great idea." By the way, it created the most complex computer animated set in the history of mankind, but it was worth it because the scene, it totally transformed the scene. We got to like deliver on this thought that like Flint was going to charm this woman that he cared about by showing her something she'd never seen before and connecting with her you know with like this spectacular environment. And it just makes the movie. And it's just another example of how if you're open to what someone else thinks and you listen carefully, you can take something and continue to make it your own. Oh. This is something we're very proud of.

**CM:** At the beginning of that movie, that's what it says.

**PL:** Right, so at the beginning of *Cloudy* we like changed the opening so that it had this crazy possessory credit, because we really felt, and we have on all of our films, that the movie's really written by everybody and created by everybody in concert. And it is a pretty messy process, but it sort of yields the most universal

result. It's that thing where like the audience is telling the story, the movie is kind of slowly telling you what it wants to be, it's revealing itself to you like a sculpture or something.

**CM:** And then it makes you seem like a genius masterclass-giving type of person, but in reality it's just rewriting and listening and being open to good ideas, and then working on it over and over and over again in a collaborative manner. And collaboration is something that is extra part of our everyday life, because we have this partnership where we collaborate on everything.

**PL:** And basically all we do is make movies about it, that's... So, okay so this is, we're going to show you a scene from *Clone High*.

**CM:** In which Gandhi elicits the help of George Washington Carver to make a film called Black and Tan.

**PL:** That Gandhi wrote.

**CM:** Yes, about cops.

**PL:** About cops. I can't remember, there's like a really good tagline but I don't remember it right now.

**CM:** Anyway, so here is this scene which is I would say not the best collaboration.

**PL:** Yeah.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

Anyway, pretty dorky.

**CM:** So there are some cons to having a writing partner. You get...

**PL:** I think we worked out the math.

**CM:** You get half the money, that's one piece of data, a data point.

**PL:** Hold on.

**CM:** Okay, this is good.

**PL:** Yeah, yeah, we're going to write this down.

**CM:** Interactive, multimedia stuff.

**PL:** This is real interactive. This is good, okay. That's it, okay.

**CM:** Okay.

**PL:** Yeah.

**CM:** It takes twice as long.

**PL:** Okay, okay. Twice as long. Yeah.

**CM:** It's, I would say two times as challenging also. Twice as long, twice as challenging.

**PL:** Yep.

**CM:** But, the work is 1.3 times as good. So it's all worth it.

**PL:** Yeah.

**CM:** That's good math, that makes sense.

**PL:** That's good.

**CM:** The point, there's a lot of benefits because much like you know you have to collaborate with your entire crew when you're making a movie, and you have to collaborate with the studio and producers when you're writing a movie, you're going to have to collaborate, you're going to have to defend your ideas at some point. And when we work together we're constantly having to defend our ideas to each other, but if we can't defend them, if I can't defend my idea to him then it's not good enough for me to defend it to a crew of 400 people.

**PL:** But it's super frustrating, because he only agrees with my like 95 percent of the time, so there's a lot of, you know, there's a lot of conflict. This is the biggest fight we've ever had in our lives. It was about Abraham Lincoln's nose. Chris wanted it to be a square nose, and I wanted it to be... Oh sorry, I wanted it to be square, and you wanted it to be round.

**CM:** Yes.

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**PL:** Why did we fight so much about this, I can't even remember. Anyway we resolved on a rounded square.

**CM:** Splitting the difference. STD always works. People misunderstand when we say, "Oh, let's STD." Anyway, so the pros...

**PL:** There are pros.

**CM:** Yes, so people ask us how do we work together as a team and this is why.

**PL:** So we thought we would set up this place as kind of a writers' office.

**CM:** In the words of Montell Jordan, "This is how we do it."

**PL:** Yeah.

**CM:** So, we have...

**PL:** It's a bit clean. So we brought some supplies, here we go. This is good. That's good. There we go, and some more. That's probably close to getting it.

**CM:** That's about probably enough, that's probably enough.

**PL:** There's a lot of paper, there's a lot of like scripts everywhere, and then there's a lot of stuff on the... Yeah, that's I think...

**CM:** That's how we start.

**PL:** Yeah, that's kind of like art directed, right?

**CM:** Yeah.

**PL:** Yeah, that's pretty good.

**CM:** So then the first thing that we do when we're trying to write something. Oh that's pretty good.

**PL:** This is really funny, who made this? It says, 'BAFTA Masterclass, written by Phil Lord and Chris Miller, based on all knowledge and experience'. There you go, that's important, that's a good screenplay. Okay. What happens now?

**CM:** So we do step one of what we do when we're working together, which is...

**PL:** Yeah.

**CM:** Which is...

**PL:** We get coffee.

**CM:** Right.

**PL:** That's super important.

**CM:** There is a myth that people think that because the stuff that we write is pretty out there that we must be drunk or high or something when we're working, and the truth is other than caffeine there's, it is a drug and alcohol-free zone when we're working. I couldn't possibly get anything done if we were...

**PL:** We're also like way too square.

**CM:** That's also true.

**PL:** Yeah.

**CM:** I think if you've ever seen either of the *Jump Street* films you'll know that we have no idea what it's actually like to be on drugs.

**PL:** That's exactly true. But coffee, coffee's great. It's full of anti-oxidants. The enlightenment, that wouldn't happen without coffee and different coffee shops, so that's very important. Then you're going to get down to business. Okay, step two is procrastinate.

**CM:** And we've tried to eliminate this from our routine but it, no matter what it takes like 20 minutes just to sort of get in the zone, whether we're talking about what crazy thing Donald Trump said yesterday or what our favourite Pringles flavour is, which was asked to us over the internet.

**PL:** Mine is 'Chemical Potato'.

**CM:** It starts the process of batting ideas around and getting loosened up, and getting into a more open mode of creativity. Which is if you've ever heard John Cleese talk about creativity, he describes it as an open mode and closed mode, and the open mode is where ideas flow, there's no bad ideas and you're exploring in a very free and



messy way.

**PL:** Yes, and I thinking of the hard things for us when we were learning to work together is it's hard to get both people in the open mode at the same time. Because what happens is like he starts pitching something and I go, "Well, let me try to evaluate that." And eventually you learn that in order to work better, you both need to be in the open mode at the same time. You both just have to commit to the fact that like we're not going to, we're not committing to anything right now, we're just going to like chase this weird idea. You know like, I don't know I had this idea about like office supplies who go to school, right?

**CM:** And I say, "Okay, alright, well that's a good idea." Or maybe I would say, "If it's office supplies they'd go to an office because they're office supplies."

**PL:** "That makes more sense. Okay, that's good. Maybe they hang out in this like supply closet, and there's like a post-it that like, you know like he's shedding or something like that."

**CM:** "And there's a stapler, that's the boss, and he'll..."

**PL:** "And yeah, a paperclip who likes to bring everybody together."

**CM:** I'm telling you this was, this part was not scripted guys, this is fresh here.

**PL:** Fresh comedy.

**CM:** I know that we have said a lot about...

**PL:** You need to be in the open mode too.

**CM:** A lot about having to rewrite stuff, but we didn't actually rewrite this presentation.

**PL:** No, no.

**CM:** And take our own lesson.

**PL:** This is the first draft. So then you know you throw a bunch of that crap out there, and then you really start to go like, "Okay, that's like a crummy idea. Let's

move onto something else." And you basically repeat that process over and over and over again.

**CM:** Yeah, closed mode is where you're editing and sort of picking out from the mess the good little bits, and it's a very low yield situation.

**PL:** Yeah, if we're on set shooting, like if you have like two or three like really wonderful crowd-pleasing moments in a day, that's like a huge win. The magic of the movies is that they get edited down. Nobody wants to see the four-hour assembly of *22 Jump Street*, it's horrible. We didn't even watch it, we only watched it like a reel at a time because it was so crummy. And it's the same thing for screenwriting, even more so.

**CM:** So we should talk about how really specifically we get into the writing process.

**PL:** Yes.

**CM:** Which is, oh yeah, we trust our audience.

**PL:** I think this is supposed to be about the idea that like when you get notes from your partner, or from a test screening, or from a friend who reads the script, it's really important to take those notes on faith. You can put your energy into arguing about whether that's a right impulse to have, but the truth is that that is a human being who watched something or read something with their, you know as earnestly as possible, and they reacted in some way, and that reaction is truth. Because again what we're trying to do is get you to tell the story. So if you're telling some other story than the one that I want you to tell, then I have to take that as really important information and figure out how to solve for it so that...

**CM:** Sometimes people will pitch you a solution that you don't like, but there's something underlying the solution which is the issue that they're confused about something or they're turned off by something, and you have to honour that.

**PL:** So when we're our best selves, when he gives me a note on a scene, I might

not like his suggestion for how to fix it, but I try to take on faith that the impulse behind it is a real problem. And we do that with the studio and we do that with test audiences as well.

**CM:** So, here's our super simple writing process that we have used, have developed now over all of these movies and television shows.

**PL:** Very, very simple.

**CM:** We outline story beats for quite a long time until we can't stand talking about it anymore and we have to go write it.

**PL:** Right.

**CM:** Then we split up scenes based on who's more excited to write the scene, and/or who understands what the scene's about better than the other one.

**PL:** Then we switch and rewrite each other, usually to the great displeasure of the other person. And then we get together in an environment such as this and...

**CM:** Talk it through.

**PL:** And talk it through. And sometimes it can get emotional, but then we just drink more coffee and it's okay. And we try to, you know we basically repeat that over and over and over again as many times as possible.

**CM:** Then we show it to our friends, they tear it apart, we repeat the steps, and then we give it to the studio and they tear it apart, usually slightly less than we tore it apart or our friends tore it apart, and then we repeat that process again.

**PL:** And then we're almost done. So we do that some more, right, and then we'll like do a table read and we'll have it, and we'll bring a bunch of actors in and they'll say a bunch of stuff out loud.

**CM:** When you hear it out loud you realise it's terrible.

**PL:** It's so embarrassing; I cannot tell you. We've also, you know we had to do a bunch of auditions for the movie we're

making right now and we wrote these scenes, I can't tell you how embarrassing it is to hear somebody say something out loud 500 times. 500 different people riffing on the same bad joke, it's dehumanising is what it is.

**CM:** Anyway, then we go to shoot the movie, and we're still rewriting on the day, realising that the situation needs some adjustment. And then we edit it together and we realise it still needs some more adjustment, and then we record ADR, and then we finally pass out in a shivering lump. So that's our super efficient writing process that you guys can do too if you want to.

**PL:** Yeah.

**CM:** Yeah, so that famous actual genius master screenwriter William Goldman said...

**PL:** He looks great.

**CM:** See, he and Aaron Sorkin, these guys, they know how to do this.

**PL:** They know how to pose for a picture. And they don't go to Planet Hollywood. Very important.

**CM:** Do you know who consumes the most mental health benefits of any healthcare collective in America.

**PL:** It's the Writers Guild of America. Like I sat next to a guy on a plane once who like worked in the insurance business, and he said that was like a clichéd joke, like punchline at like their conventions, is that they talk about the Writers Guild and how much they have to go to the psychiatrist. And this is the reason writing is rewriting, it's this agonising process.

**CM:** Everybody I've known that has made works that are great all share in common a sort of obsessive, neurotic desire to make it better, even when it's already good. And if I hear somebody say, "Oh I'm really excited about my screenplay, I think it's really great, I'm super happy with it," I have a bias where I think, "Your screenplay's terrible and this is bad." Because I, the closest I've ever come to saying something like that was like, "Well, it's on its way."

**PL:** That means like you think you're going to win an Oscar. Slow down buddy, don't get too big for your britches.

**CM:** So what we, and we are very obsessive and never happy and never satisfied.

**PL:** We're telling you that anybody can do this job, but don't do this job.

**CM:** It's total misery.

**PL:** If you can do anything else. We don't have any other skills, so we're stuck.

**CM:** So once we get into these scenes, like when we're talking about them together we're asking ourselves a million questions about like, is this scene necessary? Does the story work without it? Is there a way to tell this story more efficiently?

**PL:** I wish I liked this character more. Like I feel like this is a stock move. Is there something more specific? could we observe something about somebody that we know? Oh, this reminds me so much of like my friend's mom, and she has this very specific you know human problem, and how could I express that through like Lego Batman or something.

**CM:** Yeah and you're constantly going like, "Isn't this, does this feel like a generic version of this scene? How can we make it more specific? How can we make it the twist on what you've seen before but still get to the elemental truth?"

**PL:** The other thing that we spend a lot of time thinking about is that the undivided attention of human beings is such a precious resource. One of the things that's really special about movies is a lot of times people go into a theatre like this and they watch them completely with no other distractions, and if that's going to happen you need to honour that by trying to present something that's worth going into a theatre for. Or to go back to the beginning, a shaman is taking you into a cave 30,000 years ago to give you some kind of insight, and sometimes we fall short, but we're always trying to deliver something that's worth the

journey.

**CM:** And you're asking like for the character, Is this character unique and specific enough? Do I know what this character would do in any situation? I use this thing that, do you guys ever, did the show *Cheers* ever make it across the pond?

**PL:** Yeah.

**CM:** So there was an episode of *Cheers* where Cliff Clavin went on *Jeopardy!*, which was a great quiz show, and it was a great episode, and you automatically knew what was going to happen, or what types of things could happen if that character was on *Jeopardy!*. And so there's sort of this test where you can ask yourself, "What would this character do if they were on a quiz show?" And you think of like Homer Simpson or a character that you know is a really specific character.

**PL:** Yeah, you can write it. Like the character is so clear.

**CM:** You go, "Oh, I know what Homer would do on *Jeopardy!* and how terrible that would go." But if you have a character and you're like, "Oh they'd be pretty good, they'd get some answers right, they probably wouldn't cause any trouble," then you don't have a specific character that's specific enough. So you're constantly trying to do that.

**PL:** This is important. This is an important step. It's basically just to reiterate that we, you know you've got to hate your own work, you have to be your own worst critic. Because no one else is going to care as much as you will. And it's that thing of like in the open mode you need to be as creative and as open-minded as possible. When you're in the closed mode you really have to like ask yourself, "Is this good enough?" And we never think it's good enough. I don't know what happened to us, our parents are really nice, but for some reason we aren't ever satisfied.

**CM:** A studio executive once said, "The only positive emotion you can feel in this business is relief." So everybody do this job!

**PL:** Yay, screenwriting! So, okay so we then took this process and applied it to the movies that we worked on since. So *21 Jump Street* we had this script that we all really liked but we thought it could be a little bit better, so we convened a big room of all of our friends. And our producer who's the greatest guy called us on the phone screaming, "Why are all these writers and directors invited to the table read? Don't you realise they're all going to have ideas?" Different ideas, like yes, that was what we hoped for. And Neil's point, and I understand it, is that nobody wants to take something that's pretty good, right, and like turn it into something like considerably worse. Well we do, we do, we're willing to risk that.

**CM:** Because he also said one very smart thing shortly thereafter which was, "I only have one boss and that's the movie." And that lets you know that the audience will let you know if it's good or not. And yes we're kind of wandering around somewhat blindly in the dark trying to find our way, but you always have the ability to show it to an audience, show it to a friend, show it to somebody that you trust, or put it up in front of a group, and the audience will tell you if it's good or not. And so you can continue to make it better and see what works and what doesn't.

**PL:** So we...

**CM:** Go on.

**PL:** Wait, no you've got something.

**CM:** No no, I've got nothing.

**PL:** What was that finger about?

**CM:** That was like, 'you go'.

**PL:** You go? Oh, it was a finger of encouragement.

**CM:** You did it.

**PL:** I feel it now. I feel it. So in *The Lego Movie* it started out much differently than how it turned out, and we're going to show you a lost clip. And we should probably jump right into it, right?

**CM:** Yes, basically we started, our original draft of the screenplay was, Emmet was not, had a mom who was secretly a Master Builder.

**PL:** The idea was he was raised by Master Builders, and because of like their autocratic society that they lived in they hid Emmet's abilities and told him that he was a normal person so that he would be safe.

**CM:** And so one day he built something crazy and then got thrown in jail.

**PL:** So here is that clip I think.

**CM:** I think there's audio here that we're missing. Let's go, let's do it again. Let's back it up and do it again.

**PL:** Let me see. Let's see if something's the matter with us. Could be us. Hold up. Chris, vamp.

**CM:** So, anybody know any good jokes? I can narrate this maybe. Anyway the point is that it was super different.

**PL:** Hold on, hold on, hold on. Let me see. Let me just see. No, we got volume guys, this one's on BAFTA. So anyway, so yeah, so in this clip Emmet's mom discovers that he's on the television and he's been thrown in jail. Uh oh.

**CM:** There's like a little...

**PL:** Mouse.

**CM:** This is going great you guys.

**PL:** We don't want the mouse.

**CM:** We're nailing this.

**PL:** It's off the rails.

**CM:** We can just skip ahead, that's fine.

**PL:** Yeah. I think this, the one good thing is that she shows up with a blow dart and nails these two guys in the prison, and then Emmet's like, "Mom, I didn't realise you were a Master Builder," better dialogue than that. "What are you doing here? We can't break out of prison, it'll get us in big trouble." And then I believe,

yeah then she knocks him out too. So anyway, this is a cool quote by this really nice food writer. And he talks about this thing that we talk about which is that like evolution in nature is sort of like a bunch of random things that happen, and then at the end when you go back and look it looks like a miracle of purpose, like it looks like something that there was intention behind it. And screenwriting is the same thing you know, or at least it is for us. Like by the way, this doesn't work for everybody. Someone else is going to come, Kenneth Lonergan does not work like this. That guy has like a stroke of genius and just writes it down in like you know two days and it's brilliant. This is how we work.

**CM:** Yes, I mean and the point was in the specific case of *The Lego Movie*, the story was about Emmet trying to prove himself his mom, which ultimately didn't have the same kind of elemental emotions that we were looking for. And it ran counter to our other goal for the movie which was to say that anyone and everyone could be creative, not just someone who descended from a great Master Builder, and so we had to pull out the spine of the movie and rewrite it on the fly. And luckily we had done this enough times now that it wasn't as painful, and because it was with Lego it seemed like you could just pull it apart and put it back together again anyway. And ultimately with the help of many people, and rewriting and rewriting and rewriting, angering great contributions from our entire crew, we were able to put it together in a way that was much more satisfying and much more emotional, and ultimately much funnier.

**PL:** Good, great Chris.

**CM:** That's right. See we're...

**PL:** One of the morals of the story is that revisions, even though they sound really scary can be super good. Because the thing that happened is this thing, so this obscure fresco in a random church, right, suddenly becomes like a worldwide hit, and it's all because of the earnestness and sincerity of the person who went in and thought they were like making it better, and in my opinion it like brought so much joy to my life, I couldn't

be more thrilled, right? And then the same thing happened to us which is that, if we had audio...

[Clip plays]

So that is an internet meme that happened to that scene.

**CM:** For like one, for one week in like 2012, hundreds and hundreds of people were making these weird videos based on this scene.

**PL:** And it's just if you look up like 'Gandhi, say what?' it's so worth it. The craziest things in the world happen, and it's so fun, and I'm like I'm so glad we made this show so that somebody could do this. It's just wonderful. Anyway, so okay, so we might, we know, we think we've discovered more things than we thought we knew in the first place, right?

**CM:** We've got that and that and that.

**PL:** There's all this stuff, there's that stuff, and then this thing, and now that thing, right?

**CM:** So you guys have, we gave some information today right, it wasn't terrible?

**PL:** You did pretty well, you did pretty well. So okay, this is like sort of our concluding like mission statement. Humans are the best animals, right? We are the smartest animals, and our art-making is better than any other animal in the animal kingdom. Except possibly for birds. Right, I'm super excited about birds. This is a Bowerbird, it makes these crazy nests, okay. And if you like take one thing and you move it out of the way the bird will come and like put it back. It does this as a mating ritual, it uses our garbage and turns it into like these beautiful things. And the reason that we wanted to show you this is that you are all way smarter than a bird.

**CM:** Birds are really dumb. So if a bird can do it...

**PL:** Birds are so stupid. And look what they can do.

**CM:** But they work really hard to make these crazy beautiful garbage nests.

**PL:** And it's very important to us that people remember that they have this innate ability to tell stories and make art. It's baked into the DNA of basically every living creature on Earth to be able to do this.

**CM:** And all you have to do is not underestimate yourself and work really, really, really hard, be open, listen to other people, and work your butt off. That's it.

**PL:** That's it.

**CM:** That's all you have to do.

**PL:** So we have designed a pledge for everyone to say together. Are you ready to do this with me? Okay, repeat after me. Don't worry, I know you don't know the whole pledge, you don't have to commit to the whole pledge just with the first sentence, alright? I will make new things.

**Audience:** I will make new things.

**PL:** That's great.

**A:** Even if I don't make money doing it.

**PL:** That's good.

**A:** Because I'm a human being. Which is the best animal.

**PL:** Very good. Guys, I really really really like that.

**CM:** How many of you guys sing and dance?

**PL:** Yay.

**CM:** Alright alright, that's better, that's better, alright.

**PL:** Thank you guys, we really appreciate it.

[Applause]

**CM:** Justin, I'm going to come over to this side so Justin can sit here.

**PL:** Yeah, do you want some room?

**Justin Johnson:** Yes.

**CM:** Look at that.

**PL:** Don't slip, watch your step.

**CM:** How did we do? Did we run long?

**JJ:** Do you know what, you were pretty much exactly the time allotted.

**CM:** Unbelievable.

**PL:** That's so great because we practiced it so many times.

**CM:** Did not take our own rewriting advice. Okay.

**JJ:** So I'm here now in the writing room with you.

**CM:** Yes, here we are.

**PL:** Welcome.

**CM:** Inner circle.

**PL:** Your posture isn't right by the way.

**JJ:** Is it not?

**PL:** No, it's kind of like this. Super, yeah, this is better.

**JJ:** And you talked about making these revisions and kind of cutting stuff out and rewriting, and that's easier said than done though isn't it? I mean because you have an emotional attachment with what you're writing.

**PL:** No it's miserable.

**CM:** That's why we're so sad all the time.

**JJ:** And literally, I mean when you come up with the gags there, particularly with something like animation, animation can take years to do, how do you kind of, do you keep refreshing those gags or how do you know you've got the right gag, I mean how does that kind of work?

**CM:** Well there is a danger obviously, the thing that made you laugh the first time, and maybe the second and third time, by the time you've gone through this thing 27 times it's not making you laugh

anymore. And so that's why showing it to an audience, letting someone else read it, and if someone else is responding to it you know, okay this is still working, I know it's not making me laugh anymore but, again you've got to trust the audience. So that's the best way to fight the, "Aargh, I'm tired of this joke," and turn it into the bad fresco.

**JJ:** And it's great obviously you know that you clearly have like involved like the crews you work with, and you're very kind of open to suggestion, but everybody has you know different opinions about things, and what makes one person laugh doesn't always work. So how do you kind of you know instinctively know what to go with, otherwise it can be a completely sort of schizophrenic piece.

**PL:** Yeah, right. Well we're, ultimately we're the deciders, right.

**CM:** We don't take every suggestion that comes our way, that would be crazy.

**PL:** But it's really that you're keeping yourself open to suggestion, and wanting to celebrate the thing that somebody's bringing to the table. So even if it's you know the janitor, hearing that suggestion is such valuable information. Because you do get lost in the weeds. So that's why like when we've got great crew members like we do on this movie, you know you're looking to the DP to go like, "What's inspiring that guy?" Because I want to get the best out of him.

**CM:** But ultimately you're the person who is carrying the story forward. And someone might say, "Ooh, what if you do this?" You'd say like, "That's a cool idea, but it kind of goes against what we need to set up for later in the movie." Or, but if you hear, if you're open and you're listening to a lot of people there will be common threads where people, like, "I get confused about this thing," or, "I don't understand this thing," over and over and over again, and you'll get to that spot. And so that's when you really have to listen and go, "Okay, something's wrong here because people keep saying this," and we have to find our own way to solve it usually

that feels true to our voice. And that's how you make it consistent and still feel like it's your own, but being open to the truth of how people are reacting to it.

**JJ:** It seems, I mean in Hollywood in particular there actually, I mean the whole purpose of these screenwriter lectures are to sort of really herald and celebrate writing, because actually writers often see, to be at the bottom of the pile in lots of respects.

**PL:** Oh yes, well if you're on a plane and you're sitting next to somebody who's like a little too curious about what you do, if you tell them you're a director then you've got like a half hour conversation on your hands. If you say you're a writer, they shut up immediately and leave you alone. It's super sad.

**CM:** And if you say, "I inherited a box company from my dad..."

**PL:** Cardboard boxes are a super not interesting thing to talk about.

**JJ:** And you've touched on the fact that obviously you know there were certain projects including *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* that you were originally fired from, is that, I mean especially when you're at the start of your career, is that always a kind of worry that you've got this kind of slightly sort of precarious sort of...

**PL:** Yes. And I think it's a real hazard because the minute you, the turning point on *Cloudy* was when we decided that we were so miserable we wanted to quit. And then we called our lawyer and we said, "We want to leave the movie. We don't think we can make a good movie." And he said, "Don't quit. Get fired. You get six months pay if you get fired." We're like, "That's brilliant." So we're just going to like make the movie we want until somebody tells us to stop, and they never did. And we were like, "Please, if you don't like this fire us. Please fire us, we're dying."

**CM:** Because not all notes are good, and sometimes notes are being given not from a genuine reaction to a script, but from a sort of fear-based place, or something that is not 'I'm reading this

and I like this and I don't like this and I'm confused about this', it's something totally different. Or someone has their own idea that doesn't quite fit with what you're trying to do, and you shouldn't try and do every single note because it's not healthy. But there's always, oftentimes good thoughts in there, especially if it's coming from a sincere and genuine place.

**JJ:** And there are times where there will be somebody who came up with the initial idea for a film who leaves very early on, but they kind of keep the credit. I mean I don't really understand how the writers' credit thing works, because there can be literally dozens of writers sometimes on films by the time it's gone from one bit to the end.

**PL:** Yeah, and you can game it too. Like if you really care about that stuff, change all the character names, that's super important, if you want to steal credit from somebody else, yeah. You know we have the opposite point of view which is kind of like, especially when you're directing a movie, like you've got plenty of credit you know, you don't need to like gobble up other peoples' necessarily.

**JJ:** And as directors and producers, because obviously you're juggling a lot, when it's a project that you haven't written, how do you kind of treat the writers in terms of, I mean do you invite them to the set?

**CM:** Terribly, terribly. We have no respect.

**PL:** When we're our best selves we try to be as inclusive as possible you know. I think one of the hazards of writing on a project that we're producing is that we're probably more opinionated than most about what the writing needs to be, right?

**CM:** Definitely.

**PL:** Yeah.

**CM:** Yeah and so, but we have been on the other side and are still constantly on the other side, so we you know, we're approaching movies as writers first, so

you know we're very obviously involved in the screenplays for every movie that we're involved in, whether we're producing it or directing it, and have a lot of very strong opinions. But we speak the language of writers so usually it's coming from a place of mutual respect and we're working with people that we love and admire. Right now we're working with you know Larry Kasdan, who's, once William Goldman dies will be the greatest living screenwriter.

**JJ:** You work with the second...

**CM:** Yeah. You know it's amazing to work with really talented people, and we are taking a current masterclass in screenwriting from him because his style is very different from ours.

**PL:** He doesn't work this way at all. You know he's like, "I write it once and I'm good." It's a great luxury if you can do it that way.

**CM:** And we're much messier and sloppier and we work where we're way too verbose, and then we break it down and cook it down like a roux into something more concentrated. And he has an ability to be succinct and get the point across much more efficiently than we can do out of the gate, which has been a great example for us to take.

**PL:** Yeah.

**JJ:** And bearing in mind that your approach has been so kind of open and collaborative until now, and obviously you've talked, obviously when you work in a studio and there's a lot of money at stake, you've talked about test audiences and the studio execs and the producers, but is there almost a danger that if you become too successful you're going to stop getting that.

**PL:** Yeah, and matter of fact these days, I don't know that it's because we're successful, but these days we tend to be harder on the material than anybody else. So we used to have arguments with the studio, we were like, "You guys have to stop giving us notes, like the movie's good, please leave us alone." And now we have arguments like just the other day like, "The movie's not good enough,



like what do you guys do? You can't just finish it? Like you can't be satisfied with just this good test? Like it can be like 30 percent better and it's going to mean a lot to the bottom line if you do that." And like *The Lego Movie* got a lot better in the last six weeks, you know it got a lot better like during the mix. And it's because when everybody else was pretty satisfied, we were like, "Hmm, that joke still bums me out. Like can we loop something in there?" "This like action sequence is kind of unclear, I think it might be because there's like too much sound going on. Maybe we can strip some of that out." I mean you just never stop.

**JJ:** And we touched on obviously working for a big studio, but with *The Lego Movie* you've got like a double whammy, because you've got a massive corporation wanting to protect their brand as well.

**PL:** Yeah, yes that's right.

**JJ:** And what are the kind of constraints of working within that? And what were, I mean were there things you just outright couldn't do?

**CM:** Well, you know...

**PL:** We couldn't do the *Clockwork Orange* indoctrination scene.

**CM:** There was a scene in which Emmet had been captured and then they peeled his eyes open and made him watch a *Clockwork Orange* type of video.

**PL:** Like a bunch of boring things, right?

**CM:** That they thought was a) too disturbing, and b) like a reference to an R-rated movie that they did not think was appropriate.

**PL:** For the most part we had a lot of latitude, don't you think?

**CM:** Yeah, we totally tricked them, for sure.

**PL:** Yeah.

**CM:** No, it was great, we...

**PL:** We love that, like what that brand stands for. You know like it's about ingenuity and creativity and like flexibility and things that last. You know like how could you not get inspired by that? And the fact that it's so democratic, that people make their own weird little films out of those bricks in their basement, that's the kind of movie we wanted to make.

**JJ:** And were there things that you learnt from making the first movie that you've been able to use when it has come to the second movie?

**CM:** Well you mean *The Lego Movie* sequel?

**JJ:** Yeah yeah.

**CM:** Well the trick on that one was that it was a movie about originality, and then now you have to make a sequel to that movie about originality. And it's super hard.

**PL:** And we already did our one trick in the *Jump Street* sequel...

**CM:** Of like doing the same thing again and being like...

**PL:** Like doing a sequel about how dumb an idea it is to make a sequel. So that's finished. And so we actually had to make a movie that was good.

**CM:** But it was really hard like figuring out a storyline that was just as surprising and just as challenging, and made the Lego corporation people just as nervous as before.

**PL:** That was literally the goal. We were like, oh, we have this opportunity to make a sequel to like a big hit movie and the tendency is to just try to repeat the success of the past, and we thought that it won't be any fun if we don't use it as an opportunity to take a huge risk. So let's do something that no one's expecting, and hopefully that will come to pass. But you know, the script that we wrote I think is scary, and like really hard to make. Yeah.

**JJ:** And in writing terms the difference

between live action and animation is considerable really in the sense that when you're making a live action film more often than not you kind of make the film and a lot of it comes together in the editing, but you're kind of doing it in reverse in animation, you're kind of almost editing before you go on to make the film.

**PL:** That's it, you make the movie backwards, right? You like edit it, and then you shoot it, and then at the very very end of the process you finish the screenplay.

**CM:** But what's great about it is it allows for iteration, you get to see the storyboards and you get to see a crummy animatic of the movie in its worst form when it's not all beautiful, and you get to see if that makes you feel something then it's really going to work when it's all finished. It also gives you a lot of chances to make it better before you spend a lot of money, whereas when you're making a live action movie you've got to work on that script a lot and be really really confident about it, because once you shoot it you know you've got the pieces to work with and that's about it.

**JJ:** When you talked about *22 Jump Street* I think having a lot of material, is that because a lot of it was improvised as well or...

**CM:** Yes, and also because we are nervous obsessive humans as we said before, and we like to cover ourselves and protect ourselves and you know, we're not sure how the feeling of the flow of the movie's going to need, and so sometimes you'll do a scene and you'll be like, "Let's do one where they're kind of less angry at each other, this was kind of harsh. Let's do a sweetie pie version of the scene. And now let's do one where it's really really angry with each other," so we can, in edit, have some options and find a balance.

**PL:** Especially in comedy you just don't know what's going to work, and so you just take, you try to get as many at bats as you possibly can. And you also don't know like if you're going to have to cut a scene for some reason or another, it

never quite comes together, so sometimes you repeat story beats.

**JJ:** With animation you can't do that can you really, or it's very difficult to do that.

**CM:** You've already spent all that money.

**PL:** But it happens when we record voices. You know when you record, like we record like Will Arnett for *Lego Batman*, you know even as producers we're sitting there going like, "Oh that's funny. Why don't you try this weird thing?" And then suddenly it's like Will Arnett and Zach Galifianakis like riffing about like their relationship or something, and that winds up becoming something that wound up being a theme for the whole movie.

**JJ:** Can we just talk a little bit about TV writing as opposed to film writing, because obviously it's a very different discipline. And when you're working for an established TV show obviously, I mean how does that work in terms of you're given a couple of episodes that you have to write, and is there a sort of character bible they'll give you, or how does that...

**PL:** It's like, so it's group writing. So like our process is kind of, you know derives from our experience in television, which is you know ten people around a table all trying to make each other laugh.

**CM:** What happens is, as a group you break all the stories, put them on a whiteboard, figure out where the season's going, and once you have an outline that everyone's agreed on then they send you off as the writer with sometimes like a week to write a draft of a script. And then you bring it back in and everyone's read it and everyone's got thoughts, and then you go page by page in this room of ten people trying to make it better, fix story things that aren't working, and then try to make the jokes funnier. And it's a really painful process watching a thing that you worked on, you're like \*stutters\* the whole time and it's very, but you have to, if you're defensive in that room you're not going to get hired back next year, so...

**PL:** You kind of have to take it. Even when they're sort of ruining it.

**CM:** Yeah you have to act like, "Oh yeah, you want to get rid of that joke? I've got ten million more in the back. Easy."

**PL:** Right, and so the way to survive emotionally that experience is to write very quickly and be very grateful that somebody is helping to fix your B+ scene, instead of be infuriated that they're taking what I thought was like an A+ like everything perfect...

**CM:** Precious jewel.

**PL:** Jewel, and then messing it up. You're just never going to, you'll never get any sleep that way.

**JJ:** But once again as I was sort of saying before, that's easier said than done. I mean you talk about being human beings, and ego is a major part of the human being isn't it? And how do you kind of, you just have to compartmentalise it and it's just...

**PL:** Yeah. You get a bit used to it and you learn to listen to yourself and know like, "Alright, I think I'm just being precious." And if I wake up the next day and I go, "Hmm, that one thing was still like great," I'll never forget it. And then right when the time comes when we need something I'll pounce, and go, "Well what about that one little bit?" And you never know, it might make its way back in.

**CM:** Right, and having a partner is always keeping your ego in check, because you're never sort of the auteur, you're always part of a team that's creating something and having to sort of defend and adjust and modify all the time.

**JJ:** And you've talked about the Miller and Lord process as opposed to the Kasdan process so to speak. Are there some films or TV shows that have just come really quickly and you haven't had to go through that kind of rigorous process? Or is it always?

**PL:** Not for us. I'd say that like, I know that

Forte wrote the *Last Man* pilot really fast.

**CM:** Really quickly, yeah.

**PL:** You know, and there's some of it, there's like a benefit to writing really quickly because things come out, you like it's like the difference between like a poem and a song. Like a poem you obsess over every word, a song like kind of like strikes you like lightning and you write it in five minutes and it's done, you know and it's kind of perfect. And he wrote a first draft that was kind of like that, and then there was a, and then we did a ton of rewriting. You know we, he did a ton of rewriting. And then at some point we went back to that old draft and said, "Oh this, there were things about this that were great," and we kind of reincorporated that back into the thing. But you know you need the benefit of both processes, that's why like when we were running a TV show we tried to get the best of both worlds, and most TV shows that are run well do this. You can get the best out of the group pretty quickly, the group isn't so good at deciding whether like to use a comma or a semi-colon right, that's better left to like an individual to get through. And the group is great at generating a lot of ideas, and then it goes through one person's fingertips and the kind of like calculus that happens, the intuitive calculus that happens in your body of like that sounds right, that feels right, and that flows, that almost has to happen through one person.

**CM:** And that's why we still split up scenes and write them individually because there's something about not having someone looking over your shoulder and having the privacy to like explore different ways to say something or try a little run without feeling like every second has to be defended, there's like something has to go through a single person.

**JJ:** And you actually when you're doing that bit, geographically going into different areas and doing that, yeah?

**PL:** Yeah, like so you like to write at home, I need to be in a coffee shop where like there's a bunch of noise and stuff, and then we come back together.

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And that process is really important too, you know just going like, "Why did you cut this line? Oh I see." And we even have like kind of a linguistic process whereby, which is derived from I figured out *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*.

**CM:** Really?

**PL:** Yeah, like so I had like a tape of like the Robert Altman *Popeye* movie that I watched like a billion times when I was seven years old, and before that what it was taped over was that guy John Grey or whatever his name is, *Men Are From Mars*, and it was, and it's this trick, which is if you're mad at me about something or you have a point of view that I don't understand, if I say your point of view out loud to you and repeat it back, then I like have a, like something happens in my body that makes me understand better what you're going through. So a lot of times like he'll a note, and I'll like, now I do it automatically, but I used to have to concentrate. I would be like, "So what you're saying is, you know it's bothering you that this thing is happening," dadadadada. And if he starts nodding and like I'm getting it, then that is really valuable information. And now I've like taken ownership of that thing, and now he feels heard, and now we can proceed with solving the problem. That's what I meant about like kind of taking on faith that that's a real problem.

**JJ:** And as you referred to before, when you on Twitter said that you were coming today you kind of said, oh you know anybody who wanted to write in with questions, and I think we've probably dealt with the very best one of those which was what flavour Pringles do you like?

**PL:** Yes, Baked Shrimp. Is there that flavour?

**JJ:** Not yet.

**PL:** I'd like to propose that.

**JJ:** So I think what we are going to do is we're going to move away now and see whether anybody here would like to ask a question. There are some mics around, we've got a question right in the middle

here and then we'll go a bit further back afterwards.

**Q:** Thank you, that's one of the best screenwriting lectures of the series that we've seen

**CM:** Yes! Yes!

**PL:** That's what we wanted.

[Applause]

**CM:** Do we get a BAFTA now?

**JJ:** Here's your BAFTA.

**Q:** Certainly the most coffee cups.

**JJ:** A question too?

**CM:** No that was great. Thank you very much.

**Q:** One of the things that come through all your work, kind of one of the tropes that is the funniest is the idea that the characters in your movies are as aware of the clichés of what's happening as the audience are, and you kind of take that like literally right to the edge of the joke.

**PL:** Almost looking right into the lens, yeah.

**Q:** So how do you know where the edge is and not go beyond it? To sort of still be funny and not have it be like a nodding...

**CM:** Yeah, sometimes we, there are jokes that get pitched that feel like they should be right but then we go, "Ah, that's, you wouldn't, but no one could possibly say that in a world where they don't know that the movie, that there's a movie being made." There was...

**PL:** What's the one that Parnell says.

**CM:** Oh yeah, so that one is...

**PL:** "That's the end of act two."

**CM:** End of act two of *21 Jump Street*, this was a sort of a late addition, was they mess up a play of *Peter Pan* and he runs out onto the screen and says,

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"That's the end of act two," and the curtain closes.

**PL:** And we cut to black and it's the end of act two.

**CM:** But it made sense in the scene, he really was saying it for that reason.

**PL:** That's what makes it fun I think. That it's like, it's been worked out both ways.

**CM:** And then we were pitching jokes for Ice Cube to say at the end of *22 Jump Street* on the beach, and he was pitching something or we pitched something that was like, "Oh I got to have that threequel money," but it didn't make sense in the world, and it was kind of funny when he said it but it didn't...

**PL:** But in edit, yeah it seemed kind of sweaty. It also, it like changes with time because now that we've done that a few times it feels like, "Oh yeah, I feel like I can feel us doing the same move." It hasn't stopped us yet, but some day it might.

**CM:** But yeah I think there's like a, you can't, for me personally if the fourth wall is completely shattered...

**PL:** It's like no fun.

**CM:** Yeah, there's no dance to it. And so you feel like there's got to be, you want to get right up as close to that line as possible, and be like, "I'm not touching you, I'm not touching you."

**PL:** Yeah, right, you want to feel like you're getting away with something.

**CM:** Right, so that when he hits me I can say, "Mom!" "I didn't touch him."

**PL:** "You did!" "I didn't break the fourth wall."

**JJ:** The was, I think there was somebody sort of right towards the back, and the people at the back always get missed out. Do you want to? Yeah, is there a hand up there or is someone just scratching their head? I think it was a scratch, let's go over here in that case.

**PL:** He was trying to touch the ceiling.

**JJ:** Let's move over here, and then we'll come down to there afterwards.

**Q:** Hey guys. Been a huge fan of all your work since like *Clone High*, and I actually wanted to just ask about that. How did that kind of initial, that first series, how did you get that away? I mean I know you kind of went into it a little bit in the history but...

**CM:** So we got our first job of making Saturday morning cartoon shows and making the Bronte sisters thing. I had like a folder of old ideas from college and one of them was clones of historical figures that go to college together. And then I pitched that to Phil, and Phil thought they should be in high school because they could be more angsty, and it was a time when there was sort of *Dawson's Creek*, *90210*, a lot of these sort of teen dramas were on the air and it was sort of, oh that's a funny trope-filled world to take this idea through. And so those two ideas came together. We pitched it to FOX, for the FOX network, and it did not, we made a pilot but then the president of FOX got quit, we'll say.

**JJ:** He 'got quit'.

**CM:** And so did our pilot, but then we showed it to MTV and they were like, "Oh yeah sure, homework sounds like a great thing for our kids to watch on television," and so we were able to make it that way. And we had no idea what we were doing, and we were in charge of a TV show, and we told them we knew what we were doing because it was animation and we were experts in animation because we made those terrible student films that you saw. And so they didn't know anything about how to make animation, and they would say like, "Oh we want to give you notes on the script," and we'd say like, "Oh we can't because you know the animation process is already a thing." That was before we learned to embrace notes, but that's sort of how that came to be. And we were in over our heads, often wrong, never in doubt.

**JJ:** We've got a question down here on the second row, a microphone's just

making its way.

**Q:** I'd love to see your expanded version of the Bronte sisters thing in a full length feature.

**PL:** Of the what?

**CM:** Of the Bronte sisters thing, we had...

**PL:** Oh, that was, it was going to be...

**CM:** It was a series of historically based action figure toys.

**PL:** There's like a full bible that we have somewhere.

**CM:** Including the Gutenberg printing press and snow cone machine. That made like inked...

**PL:** Yeah you would pour ink into the snow cones and then like the kids would eat it and there was like ink just dripping down their face.

**CM:** There was a Gandhi one too. There was like a pacifist grip Gandhi that latched onto your finger, didn't hurt, but just sort of stayed there forever.

**PL:** Anyway, they were really fun. It was like a He-Man thing, it was Masters of the Harlem Renaissance, I was really disappointed when we didn't get to make them.

**CM:** Mighty Morphin' Charles Darwin that evolves. Yeah, anyway, ask your question.

**PL:** I think that was a pre-question statement.

**Q:** Given the success you're having at the moment, are there any dream projects in the future that you would like to do? You know like Kubrick had a Napoleon project that he never made, but is there something out there you would love to do?

**PL:** We need one. Like what's our white whale?

**CM:** Our Don Quixote.

**PL:** We've always wanted to make a

billion dollar movie.

**CM:** That's' right, yeah. That costs a billion dollars.

**PL:** Yeah, featuring like The Beatles catalogue.

**CM:** Nine tenth scale of...

**PL:** Yeah it's all on water. Yeah nine tenth scale model of Paris. It'll probably happen. In our lifetime that will happen.

**CM:** We've always wanted to make a *Clone High* movie or something, but we've never had the time or time to do that.

**PL:** Yeah, I just want to get *Clone High* back on the air, that would be the best. But I don't know, I feel like all of our dream projects are so not for anyone, right?

**CM:** Yes, but hopefully we'll, I think we've been doing a lot of movies based on other properties, and I think hopefully in the near future we'll be doing some more original stuff.

**PL:** Right, we've been trying to make the most original version of like an adaptation of an existing property we possibly can, but now I think I would like to do the most generic version of an original idea we can think of.

**JJ:** There's a question right in the very very middle, and then the final question will be the sort of third to back row there in the middle.

**Q:** Hi, thanks. The parallels to game design, screenwriting to game design are quite uncanny actually. I'm quite curious what do you personally do in your own time outside screenwriting to keep yourself inspired and to draw any kind of, to help your creative process later on? Because you need to draw from something, is it hobbies, what is it?

**PL:** Oh remember hobbies?

**CM:** Those were fun.

**PL:** Well I mean this is really, like this is one of the few kinds of things we make time

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for is being able to talk to young filmmakers and other people about work because you almost never get the chance to do that. The movie comes out and then you know there's some reviews and stuff, but there's very rarely like a real dialogue about cinema. And so like when, if I have any spare time like you know being on the jury of a film festival or something, finding a way. Even like with BAFTA like being able to like, feeling like you've got to watch every movie so you do a good job voting that year. You know that, being able to watch other peoples' work and get inspired by it is really really special.

**CM:** And also going to art museums and absorbing the culture, and keeping up with the news, and just sort of like feeling like you're part of society so that you can... You know, reading articles about things, and then you can, and then every day we're coming in going like, "Oh I saw this crazy article about these butterflies that do this weird thing in Guatemala, and we should you know look at that for an alien for *Star Wars*."

**PL:** Right, or like I heard birds do this crazy thing, like we try to think about that stuff as much as we possibly can. But I can't remember...

**CM:** And we tell people who want to be screenwriters or directors that are going into university to you know study something other than film because you need to have something to say, and to look for, you know to have a point of view about. And so just the more of anything you can soak in the better, it all comes through.

**JJ:** Okay, our final question. There's a guy about three rows from the back I think it was. Do you want to put your hand back up so they can see you for the microphone? Yep, it's just winging its way over to you now.

**Q:** Hey.

**CM:** Oh two microphones.

**Q:** Two mics. I'll do it as a conversation.

**JJ:** A quick two questions.

**PL:** Don't give him a microphone.

**CM:** Rap battle.

**PL:** Yeah, we're going to lay down a soundtrack down here.

**Q:** You've talked in the last couple of questions about not having a ton of time at the minute, and it's not that surprising because you have roughly 400 million projects like in the works at various points and whether you're producing or writing. How do you deal with moving between them? Do you literally go, "Right. Monday: *Star Wars*. Tuesday: *Lego*. Wednesday: *Spider-Man*," or...

**PL:** I don't know if you can tell, we're not that organised. I mean...

**CM:** These days it's mostly *Star Wars*. But like our weekends and some nights we will, we get sent things from the *Lego* people or the TV people or any of the other things, and we have to compartmentalise is into a very small place because it can bleed in to the rest of the time. But our days now, our work days are almost entirely one thing. But we are spread too thin, we're doing too many things, and so we're trying to...

**PL:** The idea was for that for some of the projects to like fail and not go forward. But not enough of them did that, so now we're in trouble.

**CM:** All the spaghetti stuck to the wall you guys.

**PL:** It's a big flaw. Don't make such sticky spaghetti if you can avoid it.

**CM:** So I would like to be doing a few less things so that we could focus on them more and be more helpful, and so other things, the best thing we've been able to do is hire really good people that we trust to do good work. And then our dream is to become obsolete on things that we produce where we are just going, "Yay," and then get paid for it. That's our dream, we're not there yet but we are getting there.

**JJ:** And we've now got the absolute final question just over there. Yeah, you've got a microphone in your hand.

**CM:** No, he just got a microphone.

**JJ:** Oh okay, fine.

**CM:** He just loves...

**PL:** I like it though. He's our friend though, he's really nice.

**JJ:** That's for the sound which we're doing, that's fine. Good. Well you're here in London I know for a while, you've got *Star Wars* coming up, you have got multiple projects that we touched on, so really really grateful that you were here for the final of this year kind of Screenwriter...

**PL:** Oh we feel so lucky to be here, yeah.

**JJ:** A really really massive thank you to Phil Lord and Chris Miller. Thank you very much.

[Applause]