

BAFTA & BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series: Beau Willimon
3 October 2015 at BFI Southbank, London

Andrea Calderwood: Hi, what a great turnout for a Saturday. Thank you all for coming. I'm Andrea Calderwood and it's been my great pleasure this year to have been asked by Jeremy Brock to work with him on putting together this year's international Screenwriters' Lecture Series for BAFTA. And, sorry, I'll just remember all of the things I was going to say. The first thing to do is to thank Jeremy for coming up with the idea for the series in the first place, and so really without Jeremy this wouldn't exist. It was his brainchild to allow writers a forum to talk about where the film comes from in the first place, which is from the writers. And I've always said it's one of the most fun events that you can attend as part of the film industry, it's one of the things you would genuinely join in for fun, and that's what it has been like for me to be able to invite some of my favourite writers with Jeremy to come and talk about what they do. The other people who helped make it possible are Lucy Guard and the JJ Charitable Trust, without whom it wouldn't happen, BFI who have partnered with BAFTA and are hosting us tonight, and United Airlines who helped to bring in our international guests to talk with us.

I feel sort of doubly honoured to have been asked by Jeremy to help for this because one of the themes that's been running through the talks from the various writers this year has been how tricky it is to deal with producers and executives, and the annoying notes that they give. And as a producer and a former executive I feel I've come from the other side, but one of my favourite things as a producer is working with writers, and for me it's the best part of the job, so it's just been a joy this year to hear some of my favourite people talking. We had Nick Hornby, Andrew Bovell, Jimmy McGovern, Nancy Meyers, and tonight it feels like we have the grand finale with Beau Willimon. One of the things that we wanted to try and highlight this year was the increasing fluidity that's happening between theatre, TV and film, and Beau is really somebody who's done it all. From the challenging political theatre that he's written *Farragut North*, *Lower Ninth* and his other plays, and really classic political film *The Ides of March*, which he adapted from *Farragut North*,

and of course the thing that you all know him for is single-handedly changing the face of series television with *House of Cards*, which is something which has been really leading the charge in the new era of television drama which we're all enjoying. Beau Willimon.

[Applause]

Beau Willimon: Oh good, I thought there was going to be a giant version of my face up there the whole time, but it's this guy [points to BAFTA mask on the screen]. Hi everybody.

Nev Pierce: Hello, my name's Nev Pierce, I'm Editor-At-Large for *Empire Magazine*, and I'm here to say as little as possible and let this man do all the talking. You have come in just for this from Baltimore today, and you fly back tomorrow, so you can be excused for being jet-lagged. I can't, I've come from Clapham, but you will seem more awake.

BW: We're good, we've got coffee.

NP: We have got coffee so we're fine. Let's start with a small question, which is why do you write?

BW: Because I have to. I don't think that writing is a choice, it's not a career, it's something that's born of necessity. If I didn't write I would go bonkers, literally, I mean I think I would actually go insane. And there's a lot about writing that's not very pretty, in fact if you can do anything else you probably should. I mean it's a life that's filled with rejection and humiliation and self-loathing and self-doubt, but in the pursuit of something that's cosmic, however corny that sounds. And if you need to grab at the cosmic and without that pursuit you have no bearing then it's the life for you, and those are the things you have to endure. The reward being not necessarily financial success or fame, but the pursuit itself. So it's, I struggle with the why. I can't give you a reason other than, why do you breathe? Because the air is your sustenance and without it you die. Thank you very much! [pretends to get up to leave]

[Laughter and applause]

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NP: When did it occur to you that...

BW: When you're like operating on three hours sleep having just crossed the Atlantic trying to beat a hurricane you get pretty deep.

[Laughter]

Like I'm seven miles above the Earth watching a documentary on the Mars rover, I'm like, I'm insignificant, I'm a speck. The Earth is going to be consumed by the sun in four billion years, why do we even need that? In fact, where we're sitting right now in 20,000 years will be under a mile of ice, there will be no BFI here or BAFTA, there will be a giant glacier. Okay, let's go.

[Laughter]

NP: [jokily] What am I doing with my life? Okay, so when did it occur to you that you could make storytelling your living, your profession?

BW: It sometimes is still occurring to me, I sort of wake up in the morning some days, I'm like, wow, I'm actually getting a paycheck. Like I'm actually paying my rent and buying my clothes through the act of writing. I mean because I've never really seen it as a profession. I always feel like if I get a paycheck for writing anything I'm getting away with murder, because as dire as I made it sound with the self-doubt and the humiliation and the rejection and all that stuff, I get to do what I love, so I don't really think of it as a job. But in terms of when did I take writing seriously as something that, when did I make the discovery that's what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, it wasn't a clear path.

I started out as a painter. My ability to draw and paint is much better than my ability to write, I'm much more facile at that. But I'm sure there's a lot of people in this room who can draw really well or play the guitar really well. There's certain types of talent that are common where it's easy to impress a lot of people, and I was able to do that with my painting and my drawing, which I started doing before I could read or write, but I always

found that as I reached adulthood that the work was empty. It was all superficial, there was no voice to it, it was all over the place. I could impress people, or at least a majority of people just with a certain amount of craftsmanship, but people who really knew, knew that there was nothing there, and I knew that there was nothing there. And I felt like I needed to do something to make myself feel uncomfortable, to fail, to go into a zone of complete mystery and a place where I was completely ill-equipped, and that's why I wrote my first play.

I had always loved the theatre, I did in in high school and college and loved reading plays and going to the theatre, and I thought, 'Well I'll write a play, because I don't know how to do that'. And I didn't. Writing that first play, I was about 20 years-old, which is pretty late compared to a lot of my friends who knew that they wanted to be writers since they were six or seven. It felt like I was learning to draw all over again blindfolded with - [mic makes noise] It felt like that sound - with my left hand. Like I had no idea what I was doing and... this is working, right? Otherwise you're all being just like very polite. 'We can't hear a word he's saying, but we're just gonna...' But I wrote this play, it was the world's worst play with the world's worst title. The title was *The Goat Herd*. It was about a goat herd, and a manned mission to Mars, actually, and Mohammed Ali. Which sounds cool, but it's not.

And it was terrible but also thrilling because it was all discovery. And the notion that I could tell a story and have it maybe one day exist in three dimensions, in real time, in flesh and blood, with other people as part of the process was really exciting to me. I didn't ever experience that with painting because it's completely solitary, you create an art object alone in a studio, and then eventually you hang it and maybe there's a night when people gather in a gallery and all look at it together, but they're mostly drinking wine and wondering if they're going to get laid. It's not a true communal experience. So after writing that terrible play, I won a little prize from it because I think I was the only person at my

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university that submitted a script, and that gave me just enough encouragement to take it more seriously.

And there was a weird year after I graduated where I worked for the Estonian government for a few months, had a nervous breakdown in Estonia, ended up in St Louis for a month of two, then in New York living in this rat trap in the East Village. And in the midst of that I sort of bullied my way into the Graduate Playwriting Programme at Columbia University. I just showed up, and I wasn't enrolled, I hadn't been admitted, and I said to the... I mean right after you've had a nervous breakdown there's a lot of shit you'll try, and I just said, "Look, I'm no longer enrolled, I'm not paying tuition, I want to sit in on your class." And the great Cuban-American playwright Eduardo Machado said, "Absolutely not, no. Go away." I went away down five flights of stairs and then I turned around and I went back up five flights of stairs and I said, "Look, I know your class is full, but if one person doesn't show up today will you just let me sit in today?" And he said, "Fine." One person didn't show up, and at the end of the class he said, "You just keep coming back. Shh, don't tell anyone. Keep it on the down-low."

And so I kept coming back and eventually he had a meeting with me and he said, "Well what are you doing with your life?" And I said, "I have no fucking idea what I'm doing with my life." And he said, "Well why don't you come to my graduate, be on my graduate course for real, legitimately." And I said, "Well Eduardo, you've read maybe two pages of what I've written, and I know that they're bad." He said, "Oh yeah, they're bad, they're bad. But I think you should be in my programme." I don't know what he saw, maybe he just liked me, maybe he was being flip and made a promise that at least he later kept that promise. Who knows, but for whatever reason he made that offer and he kept his word, and ultimately...

BFI staff member: There is a problem with your microphone, I'm so sorry everybody [*adjusts Beau Willimon's lapel mic*].

BW: Oh right. This is life in the fast lane. I'll keep talking. So anyway, he said apply. I

wrote a play, it was slightly better than *The Goat Herd*, although still pretty bad. He took me into the programme and at that point... [*voice becomes clearer*] Is that better, good? Oh, alright. At that point, you know I felt like I had one person who was an accomplished writer who believed in me enough to say, 'come and be part of my family'. And it gave me enough confidence to think that this was something I could do, and that's so important, that person or persons who very early on say, 'I believe in you'. Because it's really hard to believe in yourself, I still struggle with it. I often think I'm a fraud and that I've somehow pulled the wool over everyone's eyes. You become accustomed to that, it's something you live with, it's sort of like a spirit animal, that feeling of fraudulence. But it can be crippling and stop you before you get started early on, and Eduardo, I feel like he saved my life because he allowed me to realise that this is what I needed to do. He said, 'you should be breathing oxygen, and here's an oxygen tank, and now the rest is up to you'. And without it I would have suffocated.

NP: And before you then got into writing professionally there's this little period of time where you worked on political campaigns, is that correct? And how did you get involved in that, how did that come together?

BW: Yeah, that's also kind of messy. So it's not a clear trajectory like, I did this, then I worked in politics, then I did this. So in the midst, around the same time I was writing that first play my best friend, a guy named Jay Carson, he's the character, the character Steve in *The Ides of March* and *Farragut North* was based on him. He's having this meteoric rise that had already began in college, he was interning for George Stephanopoulos, in this world of politics this meteoric rise. And he said, "I'm working on the Senate campaign, why don't you come work on it?" And I did, and I had a blast, it was an amazing experience. We were all over the state, you know a couple of 20 year-old guys feeling like in our own infinitesimal way we were going to make a difference and make history. And we won that race and it was amazing, I mean there's very

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few things in life where you know on a particular day at a particular time whether you have succeeded or failed, and an election is one of those things.

And it's, as I learned at that time, such a rush, such a high when you win. And as I learned later, so crushing when you lose. It's very black and white. But we won, and I wanted more, but I never thought it would be a career or a vocation, so I didn't pursue it really, just occasionally Jay would say to me, "Hey, I'm working on such and such a campaign, why don't you come and work on the campaign with me?" And I'd usually say yes because usually I was unemployed, so I had time on my hands. And if it was a candidate I believed in I would do it, and that led to Hillary Clinton's Senate race in 2000, and Bill Bradley's presidential in 2000, and ultimately Howard Dean's presidential in 2004 which was the last campaign I've ever worked on, I guess over ten years ago now.

And I drew from all those experiences to write *Farragut*, and continue to draw on them to write *House of Cards*, but politics was never like a 'thing' for me. I'm not a political junkie, I don't probably know more about politics than most of the people in this room. There's a lot of things I have to research in depth in order to write the show, but I'm not obsessed with it. And I don't feel myself as though I'm a political writer, or I should say, that I write about politics. I think all writing is political, because we all come to the table with a belief system, and politics is infused in your writing whether you realise it or not. You know, take *My Fair Lady*; great musical, great tunes, very political. May not have been intended to be so, but it says a lot about class and a lot about gender, you know based on *Pygmalion* which is very political in its own right. But I don't, I've written 12 plays and only one of them has to do with politics. And, you know, the reason you guys probably showed up is because of *House of Cards*, and so the two things that I'm most known for, *Farragut North* and *Ides of March* on the one hand and *House of Cards* on the other both are in the world of politics, but that's not a subject that interests me.

[Laughter]

Power. No, I'm not trying to be cavalier here. Power really interests me, and politics is a subset of power, and politics in Washington at this level, you're seeing power explored in the most sophisticated ways with the highest stakes. But I'm just as interested and fascinated by the power relationship within the marriage between Frank and Claire Underwood, which is the real subject of the show, not politics, if that makes sense.

NP: We're going to watch a clip from *Ides* now, which is where Stephen, played by Ryan Gosling, is being fired by Paul, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, and then we'll talk about the process of adaptation and how that worked afterwards.

[Clip from *The Ides of March* plays]

[Applause]

So can we talk a little bit about how closely *Farragut* was to your own experience, or your friend's experience, but also then the experience of seeing that staged, and then I can't imagine what it's like to get a phone call from George Clooney or Clooney's people saying, "Hey, we think you've got something here. We'd like to make a movie."

BW: Sure. Well my experience on campaigns was always really low on the totem pole. Jay was much closer to Ryan Gosling's character, he was in the inner sanctum, and at the age of 24 he was Senator Daschle's press secretary when Daschle was Senate Majority Leader. By 26 he was the national spokesman for the Dean campaign, by 30 the national spokesman for Hillary's presidential run. And so I was doing what was called advance work, I was the person that would set up an event like this. You know make sure that this chair was in the right place, that when the Governor showed up to the event where's the car going to pull up? Is there toilet paper in the bathroom for the Governor? Where are the press going to be? Have we put down tape for all the various outlets? It wasn't rocket science,

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it was mostly just long hours and enthusiasm for very little money, but I vibed on the energy of it.

Through Jay I had access to the inner sanctum insofar as he told me a lot of stories. And occasionally I would find myself in a room or at a dinner where I would see the real principals at work. So a lot of *Farragut North* for me was my 'in the trenches' experience, like in some ways I was much closer to Molly in that play, Evan Rachel Wood in the movie. You know or Ben, Max Minghella, and I was nowhere even near his position, but that person who's in the trenches, on the fringe, desperately wanting to get a peak at the inner sanctum. And Jay was in that inner sanctum with a huge amount of responsibility on his shoulders at a very young age. And the play, and what ultimately became the movie for me was bridging those two experiences. And it was interesting, I mean I had never, the most that I'd ever had with that play was a staged reading before I got the call from Warner Bros that they wanted to turn it into a movie. It had never been on stage. In fact I'd sent it to 40 theatres around the country, I didn't have an agent at the time, and those that got back to me rejected it, and most didn't even get back to me.

So I put that play away and I began working on subsequent plays. And when I got the call it was because, you know I won't go into all the details, after I wrote that play I managed to get an agent and that agent read my work and said, "I want to send this play out." I said, "Good luck, I've sent it everywhere." But he sent it out and he immediately got some interest from Broadway theatre producers, which was crazy, because I'd never had a single production of anything. And so for some Broadway producers to say, "We're interested,".... It's getting really feedbacky, huh? Let me try this [*adjusts his lapel mic*]. For Broadway producers to say, "We're interested in maybe putting millions of dollars into a stage version of this," was, it felt like I'd walked through some door into a land of insanity.

But based on that my agent felt encouraged enough to send it out to Hollywood just as a writing sample, in the

hopes that I might get some meetings and maybe get like a staffing job on a TV show or something. But somehow in the way that these things happen in their magical way it ended up at a junior executive's desk at Warner Bros who read it, he was about my age. He immediately gave it to his boss, a guy named Kevin McCormick who was an executive at Warner Bros for many years and a brilliant guy. And he had a discretionary fund, so he could just put something in development without having to go to anyone else. And we got a call saying, "We'd like to turn this play into a movie, and George Clooney and Leo DiCaprio want to produce."

[Laughter]

Remember, I'd never had a production of a play. I was temping at a place in Rockefeller Plaza where my job was to staple things and put them in the mail. And I said, "Let me think about it. I'll get back to you next week."

[Laughter]

No, I shat myself, and then when I cleaned that up we, you know I went out to LA and I met with George's people, and eventually George and Leo and the Warner Bros folks, and it was happening.

Now the rarity of this can't be overstated, it's very rare in America at least that any play gets made into a movie. Usually it has to have had a very successful Broadway run and won the Pulitzer Prize, then it's got a shot at being a movie. The fact that this hadn't had a production, hadn't won any prizes, that I had zero credits to my name, and that it was being made potentially into a movie at Warner Bros with those names is really like winning the lottery. When those names are attached to anything in Hollywood people pay a lot of attention. Not so much because they think the writing is good, but they think that George and Leo think the writing is good, so if they think this guy's writing is good, then maybe we can do something with this guy, then they'll want to do something with us, so you become this like ticket. So I had never been in Los Angeles before, I'd been in 45 states out

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of the 50 but I'd made a pact with myself that I would never enter the city limits of Los Angeles unless I arrived with a job. I didn't want to chase Hollywood. I felt like if I had a career in the theatre and that's all I ever had that's fine. If a career in theatre led to Hollywood, fine, but I wasn't going to chase it.

Well there I was, I had a gazillion meetings, I think 80 meetings in 10 days with various producers and executives and all that, and every single one to a T said, "I just adore *Farragut North*, I love it. It's so good." Now maybe half of them read it, and it's impossible that 100 percent of any group of people can like one thing, so you know there was obviously a lot of smoke being blown up my ass. And in that moment I couldn't complain because I was a guy who had been stapling things and mailing them and now, I mean I walked away from that trip with a stack of material this tall that people wanted me to adapt or rewrite or whatever. I mean people were trying to throw work at me, and I immediately thought, 'Okay, this is not going to last very long, so I've got a pinky toe in the door, and now I've got to shove the rest of my foot and my knee and my thigh and my whole body, and you know they're trying to use me to get to these people, well I can use that to my advantage.' And I did. I was able to line up subsequent jobs, and that eventually led to *House of Cards*.

The fact that the, you ask about adapting the play, and I'm, by the way you can interrupt and tell me to shut up at any point because I'm a rambler. Adapting your own play is a very strange thing. Because I'd spent two years writing this play, then I let the play go for two years, and now I was revisiting it and having to think about it being a movie with these huge names in it. So I had to rewire my brain to look at this play as though I hadn't written it, think about it in cinematic terms, which was not something I had a lot of experience doing. There's some basic differences between the two mediums, one is more verbal and the other is more visual. There are exceptions to all these columns that I'm going to say right now of course, but generally speaking that's the case. There's a pace to film narrative that is

much faster than theatre narrative pacing, because in the theatre, like in this situation, Nev and I are sitting in front of you, you are giving us your attention and energy, and we are feeding that energy back to you. The actual things we say are creating sound waves that will move through the medium of air, from my diaphragm to your eardrum, which will strike a nerve and then go to some synapses in your actual grey matter. There's a direct connection from what is happening on the stage to what is happening in your body. And when you're watching a film all you have is photons on a screen and some speakers. It's not the same sort of connection which means it's much harder to sustain.

So, are any of you familiar with the great monologist Spalding Gray? *Swimming to Cambodia*, *Monster in a Box*, *Gray's Anatomy*. All he ever had during his monologues which would be two hours long was a wooden table, a pitcher of water and a notebook. And it is some of the most cinematic storytelling you'll ever hear in your life. It's all coming alive in front of you and it was just his voice and that connection. When you see *Swimming to Cambodia* as a movie, it's a good movie, it's Jonathan Demme, it's still Spalding Gray, but it's nothing like being in the room. So I had to take this play that was only nine scenes long and start thinking about it as something that might be 100 scenes. You know you have a vast world available to you in film that you don't have on the stage. I mean you can introduce lots of new characters, you can go to lots more places, the visual dynamism of it is directly interlinked with the dialogue on the page. And there's so much storytelling you can do without dialogue, because if you get in close on a person's hand, that sometimes can say far more than the best monologue ever written. People's mouths and their hands say everything. If you sit on the Tube and you just watch someone's hands for 10 minutes you could piece together a lot of their life.

So rewiring my brain to that, which was totally new for me, was hard but also thrilling. And I did a few drafts, and then I turned it over to George Clooney and

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Grant Heslov, and they worked off those drafts and did their drafts. And at the point I handed it off my work was done, it was very much at that point going to be George's movie. I mean he was directing it, he was in it, he had pulled together the cast which was an amazing cast, and he had found the financing, and he had wrested it away from Warner Bros to get it distributed by Sony, which never, I mean it's very difficult to wrest a property away from one studio for it to go to another, so it was very much his thing. And they did their work and they changed a lot, and a lot of the screenplay for that movie is them. That [indicates to the screen] was an example of a monologue directly drawn from the play word for word, but a lot of the screenplay is them. And I was fine with that because I knew they understood the core of the story and they didn't want to mess with that.

And that was this young man at this fork in the road, having this great sort of ethical choice before him, and he chooses one direction, and the moment he chooses this direction is the moment he becomes a monster, and it's that moment of becoming a monster which I wanted to arrive at. And that is what they achieved I think in the film, in a way that was very different from the play, and they got beautiful performances out of everyone, and I'm very proud of the work that we all did, but particularly grateful to George for being so passionate about it and making it happen, because those sorts of movies, I mean look around, they're not getting made anymore. Certainly, well at least not in America as much. If you don't have a comic book hero, good luck. And so all in all for me it was an incredibly positive experience, and it opened up that door that I got my pinky toe into, and there's no doubt in my mind that I wouldn't be sitting here if it wasn't for a number of people: Kevin McCormick, the junior exec that worked for him, George Clooney, Grant Heslov, all the actors that said yes to that film, the people that put the money into it. If it weren't for all of those people taking a chance on this piece of material by someone who had no credits whatsoever, then I'd still be stapling stuff and mailing it.

NP: So you had *Farragut North* and then you get the call about doing the movie, but then you get BAFTA And Oscar-nominated, and then a call about *House of Cards*. So you've written for stage, you've then written for the big screen, was there any hesitancy then about going, "Well now I've got to learn how to write for television," and is that much of a different experience?

BW: Yeah, again it's a little messy, because it's not that linear. The way I'd gotten that agent which is how *Ides of March* happened is by writing a pilot for AMC. AMC is the network that did *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* and *Walking Dead*, but when I got the gig they were just starting. And a good friend of mine, Sam Forman, had a really good meeting with them. He had an agent, he had had shows produced on the stage, and they had said to him, "We love your spec script, we're looking for three things as we start this new venture of original content. We're looking for period pieces, espionage pieces, or smart horror. And do you have any of those things?" And Sam said, "I do not." And they said, "Come back when you do." And he said, "Okay." And then Sam and I went for a drink, and he said, "Do you have any ideas for period, espionage or smart horror?" And I said, "What the fuck is smart horror?" He's like, "I have no idea." I guess it's *The Walking Dead*, right?

[Laughter]

But we're like, okay, we don't know what smart horror is, so our best bet here is espionage or period. And it just so happens that in grad school we had had an assignment to come up with a pilot idea, and my idea, because I'm a history buff, was to do a story about a cotton plantation during the civil war, the American civil war, entirely from the perspective of the slaves. Because to date, at that point, there had been, except for *Roots*, you know and a handful of other examples, very few stories told from the slaves' perspective in terms of slavery and the civil war. Since then we've had great movies like *Django Unchained* and *12 Years a Slave*, but at that time there was virtually nothing. So I wrote this really intense

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treatment for this idea and all of my teachers said no one would ever put that on air, it's just way too intense.

And TV at that moment, *Sopranos* was just kind of getting started, so the cable revolution, the premium cable revolution in the States was just beginning, and no one had realised it was a revolution yet. So I said, "Okay, you guys know better than me," and I put that away. But Sam a couple of years later says, "Do you have anything that's period, espionage, smart horror?" And I go, "I have period. I have this one idea. Every one of my teachers said no one would ever do it, but the treatment's written, and I can work espionage in." Because I happened to know that there were instances where slaves would act as spies for the North, because that was the side that was going to ensure their freedom should they win the war. And so I was like, well what if I have a free man from the north who's framed for murder and he's given a choice, he's either hanged or he's sold into slavery to be a spy on this plantation, which I know there were instances of that actually happening as well.

And that seemed like a great hook that actually kind of completed the idea, so we went into AMC with it. We dressed up like, I remember I think I wore a three piece suit of something. I came from my temp job where I was stapling stuff, and we were both in suits and they laughed at us, because you're not supposed to wear a suit in Hollywood if you're a writer. Write that down.

[Laughter]

And so, and we pitched it and they bought it in the room, and that's how I got my Writers' Guild card, and how I ended up getting Sam's agent, which was the guy who sent *Farragut North* out. They didn't make the show, obviously. They made a show about advertising execs in the 60s. A funny moment along the way is, at one point they gave us the script and they said, "Can you make yours more like this?" And we said, "Alright, we'll read it." It said *Mad Men* on the front. It was the pilot for *Mad Men*. And after reading it Sam and I go

like, "Do they want the slaves to be like stirring cocktails? Make it more like this?"

[Laughter]

So we go in and we say, "Forgive us, we're dense. This is a really amazing script, but how are we supposed to make ours more like this one?" And without batting an eyelash they just say, "Well you know, just better." So, "Okay."

[Laughter]

Ultimately they didn't make it. I think one of the big reasons is they were, you know they thought to themselves, 'Well hold on, we need a full working cotton plantation and horses and hoop dresses'. And it was a brutal show, I mean we didn't shy away from the horrors of slavery. There was lynchings and beatings and rapes that permeated the story, and I think they freaked out and so they went with Don Draper. I went to high school with Jon Hamm actually, we were in a play together. That's another story. But yeah, so, writing TV. I had written that, and then there was a few screenplays that I wrote. One was a blind script for Warner Bros that was part of the *Ides of March* deal. I hubristically tried to tackle *Tale of Two Cities*, I was like the sixth writer in 20 years to try and make that happen for Warner Bros. And I think I wrote a good script, and I think the five scripts before me were also really good, they just couldn't commit.

And then I wrote a couple of other screenplays that didn't get made, and I was sort of at this moment where I go, 'Well I had this movie that George Clooney made and got nominated for this stuff, and I got my foot in the door, and now I've had three scripts that haven't gotten made. I mean it may be ending'. You can only write so many scripts that don't get made before people stop hiring you to write scripts, and it was right at that moment that Fincher called and said... Well first there was the call, "Fincher wants to talk to you. Have you heard of this thing called *House of Cards*? They want to make a TV show." And I'd heard of it, because if you write anything about politics, at some point someone's going to say, "Did

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you watch *House of Cards*?" And at that time they meant just the BBC version, ours didn't exist. So I'd been meaning to watch it anyway, and I figured, 'Well, Fincher's one of the great living filmmakers, and you know I don't particularly want to do TV because I like writing for the theatre, I like screenplays, there's a discrete beginning, middle and end to the process, and TV is all-consuming'.

And still at that time there was still a little bit of like you know, is TV quite filmmaking? But I figured, you know, 'If I get a conversation with David Fincher out of it and I've been wanting to watch this thing anyway, what the hell'. And I start watching it, and about 30 minutes in I had a gazillion ideas. I'm like, 'Oh fuck, I have a lot of ideas here. Okay, well hopefully Fincher and I hate each other so I don't have to do this'. And I got on the phone with him, and within like 10 seconds, you realise when you're talking to David Fincher, and you have spent a great deal of time talking to him so I'd be curious if you had this experience when you first met him, you're dealing with the sort of mind that you may never encounter again. He has a savant-like knowledge of the craft and the history of filmmaking. He is incredibly clever and witty, but also concise and deep and blunt and profound in his thinking about art. His synapses fire faster than just about anyone I know, and I just felt through the phone like I was dealing with this life force that I wanted to tap into, I wanted to hold onto and work with and be around.

And we started talking about *House of Cards*, and you know we had similar instincts on the approach to it, and we were starting to come up with new ideas on the fly, and it just became clear that like I had to do this, and if he didn't hate me [laughs] then we should. And I guess he didn't hate me, or maybe he hated me but he was like, 'I'll work with him anyway'. But in any case, yeah that then began the process, a year-long process of working on the first script and eventually Netflix, and here we are in October of 2015 in London.

NP: We're going to watch a clip now from Chapter 2 from the first season,

when Zoe Barnes is trying to get information out of Frank Underwood, and then talk about how one particular piece of dialogue remained from the BBC series.

[Clip from *House of Cards* plays]

[Applause]

Now that phrase, became so famous from that series that the Prime Minister quoted it in parliament over here, and it seemed like a thing like, how are you going to make that work? And I know that that was, that informed some of your choices in terms of character didn't it when you were doing the series.

BW: Sure. That diction, "You very well might think that, I couldn't possibly comment." You hear when I say it it sounds weird, American's don't talk that way. Frances Urquhart, a Scot from privilege, can say that and it rolls off the tongue and it feels natural. Initially, I mean I knew that that phrase was an iconic part of the BBC version, and I wanted to pay homage to it in our version of *House of Cards*, so I thought, 'Well how do I get an American to say those words and they don't sound weird?' My dad is from South Carolina, and in the up-country in South Carolina is probably the closest you'll come in America to something like a British cadence and diction. And I asked my dad, I called him up and I said, "Will you just say this sentence for me?" And he goes, "Okay, why?" I was like, "Just say the sentence." And I had him say it. And I'll do a bad version now, but it sounded like, "You very well might think that, I couldn't possibly comment." I'm like, 'Okay, that's how I'm going to do this. This guy is from up-country South Carolina'.

And then that got my mind thinking, 'Well, what's the big difference in America and the UK in terms of the sort of mythology of a trajectory towards power?' Well class has a lot to do with it, and while this is much less so the case in the UK these days, for a long time you had to come from privilege or aristocracy in order to be someone that wielded power. And in the States, at least going as far back to the mid-19th

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Century, it's been the exact opposite, where if you come from a place of little means, no privilege, that actually is an asset to you. The more you can tell the story of having come from nothing, that we're all led to believe anyone can be President. [*Impersonates Bill Clinton*] "Even someone from a town called Hope," you know. Hope, Arkansas, which is just a shit stain on the side of the road you know. And I thought, 'Well how great if our version of Francis Urquhart, who eventually became Frank Underwood, came from a little tiny town that no one's ever heard of, and eventually will become President of the United States.

And so I asked my dad, I said, "What's a town in the up-country that no one's ever heard of that this guy could be from?" And my dad said, "Gaffney, South Carolina." And I googled Gaffney, South Carolina, and as soon as I saw the Peachoid I knew that was it, that's where he came from. The Peachoid is real, it's real. That actually exists, and in fact when I visited Gaffney to do some research the Mayor of Gaffney, Hank 'Chicken' Jolly, real name, still the Mayor, he took me to the Peachoid himself, and there's a wonderful picture of me and Hank 'Chicken' Jolly standing in front of that monstrosity. And a lot of the discussion about the Peachoid in the City Council meeting, we lifted more or less from actual City Council records. There were people claiming that the Peachoid was making their son gay. There were people saying it was pornographic. Yeah, I mean it's, truth is always stranger than fiction.

NP: We're going to open to questions from the audience in a couple of minutes. I just wanted to ask...

BW: I'll be quick, I'm sorry Nev.

NP: No, no, it's good. I mean, I shouldn't have prepared so much.

[Laughter]

I could have gone to the pub. Structure, so you have the structure of a play, you have the structure of a film. How does the structure differ when you're doing television, or does it differ that much,

given that it's not really TV, you know everything's dropping at the same time.

BW: Oh yeah, I never answered your question really, yeah. Well for me TV's a lot closer to the theatre because there's an ongoing dialogue with the actors and the department heads. It's like you have this crew and this family that you're spending a lot of time with, and just discovering things with as you would in a rehearsal process for a play. And something that you discover in say episode two, even though you've planned out the whole season, might influence scripts to come and have this ripple effect, so there's a lot more dialogue between the collaborators going back and forth than I think you have on a film, where most of the time you have the script and then the director takes it and directs it.

There's also the fact that you know you have just one season, for us 13 hours. A film, a movie is much more like a short story or a poem, not a moment or line can be wasted, it has to resolve itself in 90 to 120 minutes. With a television show it doesn't. Each hour or chapter, whatever you want to call it, is a discrete thing that has its own beginning, middle and an end to a degree, but it doesn't have to completely resolve itself. I mean it could actually end in a place of total lack of resolution, but the feeling that you're heading somewhere. So you can really take your time with the storytelling, you can I think dive into character in ways that are impossible to do in film or even a stage play, because you have the hours to do it. And in that way I think it's closest to a novel, more than anything else, which is also how people are watching it too these days. They're sort of picking it up and putting it down when they want to and choosing how many chapters they want to read, and you have no control over that the same way the novelist doesn't have any control over whether you read their novel on the train or in your living room, in one sitting or over the course of many months.

So the approach that Fincher wanted to take and that I guess, I mean I didn't know any better, none of us had made TV yet, we didn't really know what we

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were doing. But we just figured, okay, well we'll make a movie that just happens to be 13 hours long. And I can't describe to you what that means other than that's what we tried to do, and I think that's what a season is for us. So we don't really think about episodes as much as we think about the movie, and we just have a lot longer movie and more time to play with than the typical film.

NP: So if, we have a couple of roving mics, so if you have a question can you stick your hand in the air. Let's start over here.

Q: Thank you very much for your candid talk. There's a sort of very specific and a very general angle to my question so I'll try both. In *House of Cards* season one, I think episode eight or nine, Francis offers Doug to teach him how to play chess. My question is, would Doug have fared much better if he'd taken up that offer? Or sort of more generally speaking, how far is chess maybe an organising principle to the entire show?

BW: You all heard the question? Okay. Just out of curiosity, how many people have watched season one? Oh, right on. How many people are caught up to season three? How many people aren't? Well, tough shit if there's spoilers, you showed up, sorry.

[Laughter]

But this is season one so we're safe. I believe when Francis offered to teach Stamper how to play chess, Claire had disappeared off to New York to be with Adam Galloway, and he was feeling sort of in this restless purgatory. And Stamper if anything is functional, it's about control, it's about getting things done in a very practical way, and he wasn't, certainly not in season one, equipped I think to deal with the emotional limbo that his boss was in, so better to just get away. I don't, I've never thought about it in terms of would he have fared better if he had learned how to play chess, I don't know. Maybe, I mean chess is, and this bleeds into your second question I guess, chess to me is fascinating.

I wrote a play about Garry Kasparov's match against Deep Blue in 1997. And I'm not even an amateur chess player, I mean I can hold my own I guess with the average player out there, but it's vast. I read there were more possible games of chess than there are particles in the universe, and when you've studied someone like a Garry Kasparov, it was actually someone I brought up a lot in my early conversations with Fincher. What's interesting about Kasparov and the reason he's one of the greatest players of all time is not because of his strategy or tactics, it's not that he's thinking 15 moves ahead, it's that he's creating chaos on the board. He will sacrifice two pieces for seemingly no reason whatsoever, with not necessarily a concrete plan on how to get back that capital, but he knows that the person on the other side of the table's saying, "Why did he just do that? He must have some grand plan. He must be thinking 15 moves ahead." And at that level with Grandmasters it's about, it's like tennis, who makes the first mistake.

So if I know I'm willingly making this mistake, but what I get back is I'm psychologically throwing off the other guy who will make a bigger mistake, then it's worth it. And that's something we use all the time with Frank Underwood. To steal one of the lines from the show, "If you don't like the way the table is set, turn over the table." And something that Fincher and I talked a lot about was that politics is not about, it's not a symphony, it's jazz. It is call and response, it is reaction. The great politicians might plan out 15 steps ahead, but they'll get to step two and everything changes. There's some crisis, there's some unexpected thing, there is the chaos of the world, and at that moment you have to get rid of the next 13 steps and you have to react to that and develop a new plan, that you know will the next day will probably be thrown out of the window because of a new chaos introducing itself. And it's how do you manage that chaos and make it work for you, how do you play jazz with it, that really makes the great politicians great. And then the very best politicians know how to create chaos and make it work for them. So yeah, I guess in that respect, yeah I'm not thinking about

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chess all the time as I write *House of Cards*, but there's certainly plenty of parallel to be drawn.

NP: Does that, just quickly so I don't monopolise you, but does that metaphor hold true for the process of actually writing the show as well? Of kind of, you may be thinking, 'oh this is going to happen in episode 13', but things change.

BW: Oh yeah, all the time, totally. I mean from creative discoveries to things that are simply out of our control. Creative discoveries might be something like in season one, I think we talked about this, the first time we sat down Peter Russo's character was a big character, but never intended to be the guy who ran for Governor. That was a whole other character, but Corey Stoll was so great, and when we saw him on screen with Kevin, we all felt just, we want to see more of that. That's lightning in a bottle that we've caught, that you don't want to let that lightning go. So I made a huge shift in the middle of filming the season where I took this other character's story who was running for Governor, and I gave it to Peter Russo. Now that's not just about changing whose name is above the dialogue, that required page one rewrites from episode five onwards, but it was in response to this discovery we had made and it was totally worth it because it actually made Peter Russo's story stronger, it consolidated the story for the season so we were really focussing on this one guy as opposed to two, and it worked for us.

There are other instances where you might lose an actor. In the States you can have series regular deals, and forgive me for being a little jargony here, but a series regular deal means that you basically own the actor, you have them in first position, they can't do anything else unless they get permission from you. But there's a lot of characters that you don't have in first position because you can't afford it, so they might be in a fair number of episodes, and you kind of count on their existence, but they get some big offer from another thing and boom, they're gone. And then you've built this story around this person that is no longer available to you, you have no

choice but to change your story and react to it. And so I'm not going to name names, but that has happened before for us.

And look, here's a tiny one, it wasn't global but you guys remember in season one episode nine I think, where Francis says, "I despise children. There, I said it." And in the beginning of that episode he's talking about stuff with Peter Russo, Russo's kids are running around. One of Russo's kids knocks some coffee and it burns his hand, and he's like, "Ahh. I despise children. There, I said it," and then the rest of the episode you see him wearing a bandage. Well Kevin had actually injured his hand and there was this bandage there, and we didn't want to deal with having to shoot everything where we were hiding his hand, and so I created that opening to the show so that we could justify him wearing a bandage. But then I'm like, well I might as well make the most of it, let's have him say he despises children. And it's one of my favourite direct addresses, but that's just the chaos of the world.

NP: Excellent, down here. Do we have a mic coming? Sorry to make you run.

Q: Thank you. So the first, it's a sort of a slightly a two-part question. Firstly about *The Ides of March* which is a film I love very much and fortunately saw it in New York and it was a really fantastic experience for us when it came out. You touched slightly on your research which obviously for that came from your experience, so firstly what tools do you use for researching for other things, other projects? And the other aspect is about the male and the female voice within your work as a writer, so within *The Ides of March*, even though it was quite a male-heavy film you have very strong female voices, and this is also existent within *House of Cards*. How do you as a male writer write so well for women?

BW: Well thank you for liking *Ides of March* and for the compliment you paid me at the end about writing well for women. I'll start with the second part first which is that it's not just me writing well for women, it's also the women I employ on my writing staff, which is an important thing to do if you're going to have

female characters in your show. That said, I really am against the notion that the female characters should write the female characters and the male writers should write the male characters. What is writing if not the attempt to put yourself in other people's shoes. So I expect my female writers to be able to write men well to the best of their ability, and vice versa. Now we're all limited by our own experiences. There are certain things I will never be able to access because of things that are genetic, things that are in my upbringing, things that are cultural. We all have our limited horizons and often our unconscious biases, but I think writing is an attempt to acknowledge those and sometimes get beyond them and find the universal in all of our experiences.

So the way we approach writing men and women on *House of Cards* is that it's paradoxical. On the one hand we want to be gender blind, I mean there's no, all the characters are equally intelligent and venal. Balzac's one of my favourite writers because the women in his stories are just as insidious as everyone else, and I think that we're looking for the strength and also the weakness in every character. And there's a term that is, I don't know if it's used here often but certainly in the States, like 'strong female characters'. I take a little bit of issue with 'strong female characters', as though, you know why do you have to put the word strong in front of it? There are strong male characters and weak male characters. There are strong female characters and weak female characters. There are strong and weak trans characters. They're human characters.

And I think that you can kind of look at a spectrum, and on one end of the spectrum is misogyny and neglect. Misogyny, we all know what that means, but there's a sort of indirect form of misogyny which is like the absence of female characters or substantial storylines for them. Or that they're just relegated to their body, or just to their relationship to a man, right, so that's one end of the spectrum and that's bad. The other end of the spectrum is trying to place women on some sort of pedestal, trying to make them these sort of goddesses or fantasies, and almost trying

too hard to make them strong, which is another way actually of neglecting the complexity of their lives. So if you avoid those two ends and just say, 'well, we're just going to say this character, man or woman, has a need. What is that thing that they need, and what are they willing to do to get that need?' Then you can begin to I think address gender in a sophisticated way.

Obviously there are certain things that are different in the human experience between men and women. If Frank Underwood were having perimenopausal hot flashes, that would be strange, like that's not an experience a guy's gonna have. It is an experience that women can and will have, so we told that story for Claire in part in season one, but here's the big thing, that wasn't her story. That was part of her life, but if we had said, "This is her story, and her story is only one that is relegated to something that's gender specific," then we would have been reductive with her. But if we're just telling the story of Claire Underwood and it so happens because she's this age that this is something she's going through, then we're just being realistic. So I don't know if that answers your question, but that's how we try to approach it. And then the first part of your...

Q: The research thing.

BW: Oh, research. So for *House of Cards* it's a mixture of book learning, of experts. Jay Carson, the guy I talked about earlier is our political consultant, if he doesn't know something he puts us in touch with people that are. It's my own personal experience and it's also my writers' own personal experience. And oftentimes the research is not so much political, it's drawing from, you know you can see something happen on a sidewalk, like a man screaming, a homeless man screaming on a sidewalk, that's research. If you absorb it, if it means something to you, if you find yourself using it and colliding it with your character, so I think it's about being open. On other subject matter like Garry Kasparov, I mean the same thing. It's really project specific, but it's, the adage 'write what you know' I think is a very wise one. But also it's important to write

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what you don't know, if only to discover the things that you know that you didn't know.

NP: Over here please, halfway back.

BW: Okay, I'm going to do like the bullet responses because I know, I am such a rambler.

Q: Hi, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the tone that you decided to adopt for the US version of *House of Cards*. The British one of course is a very heightened sort of reality, yours seems to be much more grounded, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.

BW: Well, so the question's about tone. Yeah, I mean, is ours more grounded? I don't know if it is actually, I mean we still have a guy turning to the camera and talking to us which is a pretty heightened device, which we shamelessly stole from Andrew Davies and the BBC version, which he shamelessly stole from Shakespeare, who shamelessly stole it from the Greeks. But I think the big difference in tone is the BBC version, which I think is brilliant. I mean Ian Richardson's performance of a lifetime, Andrew Davies' writing is exceptional, is that it's much more satire, it's more tongue-in-cheek, and there's a pace to it because he becomes Prime Minister after four hours, and Mattie Storr is going off the roof of parliament only a few hours in. And I didn't want to do satire because I think for a shorter thing like the BBC version, satire works, but once it gets expanded satire runs out of steam, because it has an agenda. And I didn't want to have an agenda, I wanted to tell this story about these two characters, Frank and Claire Underwood, and the people that orbit around them, and I wanted to write a drama.

So there's that. And then there's the fact that David Fincher filmed the first two episodes and established an aesthetic and performative style which we still hue closely to going into season four. He almost tries to get beyond acting to just the raw space between the story and the character, without bringing, for a guy who's so intelligent, he actually in the shooting of it wants to get out of the

head. And for a guy who's so in need of control and perfection, he's actually in the filming process trying to find the things he can't control, but put them in a box that he completely controls. And it's a very particular performative style that he achieves in doing that, and of course the aesthetic style is, I mean there's probably, there's very few people I can think of that are on par with that as stylists, with David Fincher. So I think that's a big part of it too. You know he brought A+ filmmaking to a TV show and made it feel like something cinematic and ginormous.

NP: And over here please. Just there, that gentleman.

Q: Hi, thanks for coming over. So I'm here in London studying screenwriting actually, and I was wondering if you could talk a bit about when you were revising and rewriting your scripts, how do you deal with them so you can really cut to the bone of what the characters are trying to say?

BW: I'm still trying to figure that out. How do you cut to the bone? It's like how do you define pornography right, you know it when you see it.

[Laughter]

Q: That's very good.

BW: I wish I could answer that question man, I don't know if I'll ever be able to. How do you know when you've arrived at the truth? It's more than a feeling and less than a certainty. The one thing I always go to, and I mentioned it before is, what does the character need more than anything in the world? Because I believe characters' behaviour, that's it. You can talk to death what they're thinking about, what their psychology is, what their motivations are, but ultimately all the character is is what they do, because that's all we see. And if you know what they need, and they don't have to know what they need necessarily, but if you know what they need then all their behaviour will be dictated by that. And then their needs will conflict with other people's needs, and that's where you get the conflict of drama. And the honesty of that conflict

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is completely determined by the brutal honesty you have about these characters' needs. And these needs tend to be things, they're not plot driven. It's not like this person needs to get a new job, that's plot. A need is, this person needs respect, this person needs love, this person needs validation, this person needs warmth. And all of the sort of tertiary needs that derive from that usually go back to that same core need, and I guess that's as much as I can say about it.

NP: Let's go over here, and then we'll go down here, and then to the middle, and then it will be midnight.

[Laughter]

BW: I'm getting shorter!

Q: Thank you for a really interesting talk. I was particularly interested in the process with *House of Cards* where you work with different writers over the course of the series. How does that work, and how do you ensure consistency?

BW: So the question was about working with a staff of writers, and I know that's different from what typically happens here in the UK where you get one person who tends to write the whole thing. My job, I spent a year working on the first script with Fincher and his two producing partners, so we really had a notion of what we wanted to do, and I'd planned out the first 13 episodes in terms of the basic trajectory. We still hadn't completely figured out what our style and tone would be, but we did that in the first couple of episodes, sort of completing that process. But in the writing of the first season, you know I was doing this for the first time, writing something of this scale and leading a room. And the only thing that I was interested in in hiring my writers was not whether they knew anything about politics or not, but if I read in something of theirs a line, a scene, some image that I never in a million years could have thought of or come up with myself. That they had access to something that I did not have access to.

And it's hard to find those people, but when you do and you put them in the

same room I truly believe seven heads are better than one. Because there needs to be an overriding vision, there needs to be ultimately someone who's a decider, who says we're going to go with this and not with that, someone who protects the vision and voice of the show. But if you can harness that energy and you're collaborative and you challenge each other, and they all understand the vibe and voice of the show, then the possibilities are pretty incredible. Because if you're just working by yourself, you run the risk of getting in your own bubble, of not challenging yourself enough, being blind to a lot of things. And you're simply, as I mentioned before, you're limited in your own experience. So why not amplify, multiply that experience by working with other people? Plus there's just the practical matter that 13 hours of television for an hour long drama is about 800 pages, and just to write that amount in one year is virtually impossible for one person, to do it well.

NP: Great.

Q: Hi, first of all thank you very much for giving me so much pleasure with *House of Cards*, that's my absolutely favourite thing, and I wish it never finishes. But let's imagine it does, what else do you dream about writing? Where would you like to go next?

BW: I have like some very concrete thoughts about that and some very big and vague thoughts about that, and I'm not going to share any of those thoughts with you.

[Laughter]

Yeah, that's for me, and I'm a bit superstitious and I don't like to talk too much about things before they're actually happening and when they're still marinating. But I guess ultimately all I want to do is figure out the secrets of the universe. Really, I mean that's what I want to do. I don't think I'll succeed, but I can try.

NP: Gentleman in the middle here, and then I think we'll throw to the back, and then get thrown off.

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Q: Hi there, it's a bit of a random question but it occurred to me while you were speaking just now. In *House of Cards* you make quite a point that Francis likes to play video games, and I wonder why you made that decision, and perhaps why you choose certain games, because it's not just *Call of Duty*, but in season three he swaps to *Monument Valley*, and then that shot to the top of the App Store, it was kind of fascinating I thought.

BW: Well I'm always asking myself the question, what's the last thing you would expect to see in the show, or see in this world? We do a thing in the room where I start off each season where we just make a list of hundreds of things that have no place whatsoever in *House of Cards*, and most of them don't have any place in *House of Cards*, but occasionally one or two does. You know like beer pong in season three made its way in. And video games is something I came up with in the pilot, but I guess I was just looking for, we have all these notions about who these people are, what do they do when they go home at night? And maybe there's something that this guy does that isn't so different from what I do. And if you take anyone in this room and talk to them for five minutes you might begin to construct a version of what their day looks like, but there's going to be something that day that totally blows your mind that they didn't share with you that they do. Just think of what you do when you're alone, like take one hour in your house where you're alone and just really objectively look at what you do. You do some really weird shit.

[Laughter]

And video games isn't that weird, video games are ubiquitous, but it is odd to think of a congressman in the Democratic leadership playing this game, and that was exciting to me. I also happen to be a big gamer, and so some of the games you see are ones that I've fallen in love with myself, but I don't put them in just because I like them, there's something about each of those games when they arrive at that moment that is saying something about Francis and where he's at emotionally I

think. And there's been an evolution from those games, and he's moved from just pure, brutal point and shoot violence to these, *Monument Valley's* a sort of MC Escher puzzle of wonderment but also unlocking of things, which as that point in the season seemed to be where he was.

I also think that video games will probably be the primary art form of the 21st Century, far more than film and television. The same way that film surpassed novels and the stage in the 20th Century, and then ultimately TV became part of that, I think video games will do that for film and TV in the 21st Century. We're at the beginning of a new medium, and it usually takes about 50 years for a new medium to really be taken seriously, and video games finally are beginning to be taken seriously as an art form. But they're also so linked to technology and technology is advancing so fast that if we're sitting in this room 20 years from now, what people are doing with their time to entertain themselves, it will be like aliens to us back in 2015, unrecognisable.

NP: Right at the back there.

Q: Cheers, hello. I nearly, well I got into NYU Tisch earlier this year to do a Masters in screenwriting, but at the same time I got an agent and two of my scripts got picked up. I'm developing one of them now which is a sitcom, which is kind of a weird experience, I don't really know what I'm doing. But I'm just asking you is there any advice you can give for the next steps that I'm in, because it's all based around uncertainty, and I have really no idea, apart from the ideas I have in my head about what I'm creating, yeah is there any advice?

BW: The only real advice I could give is to do the work. I always struggle when writers ask for advice because there's no formula. I mean congrats on getting an agent and congrats on NYU, it's a great school, and it sounds like you're creating the opportunities for yourself that are beginning to pay off. And a big part of any form of success in any industry is looking for opportunities and then making opportunities if they're not being laid at your feet. And that can be school, it could be going out and

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making your own film on your own, it can be, if no one is doing any of your pilots, writing a play and doing that with your friends, you know no one can stop you from that. There's a million ways to create opportunities for yourself, but ultimately all of that is only there if you've got the pages. The only thing you can do that is completely in your control, and it ultimately will make you successful, at least financially or whatever as a form of success, although the real success has nothing to do with that, is having the pages and putting in the time and the thousands of hours and thousands of pages you must write.

I don't think that talking about what you're writing counts. I don't think thinking about what you want to write counts. I think the only thing that counts is the actual writing. So if you've got a sitcom that's getting some traction, there's a lot of strategic things that if we sat down for an hour and talked about this agent is doing this and going to this studio, there's all that bullshit that's strategery. But we're not going to sit down for an hour, and I don't have time to hear it now, so there's that. But no matter what happens you're either going to be making your show, in which case it's not about buying a new car and going to all the clubs, it's about you've got to put your shoulder to the wheel even more. Or you're not going to make your show, in which case the only thing that you can do is write the next one, and then write the next one, and then write the next one, and then write the next one, and the next one, and the next one, and never stop, until you die.

[Laughter and applause]

You know my first thought, my first thought I shit you not, my first thought every day when I wake up, like my mantra, as soon as I have the ability to have a conscious thought it's, 'I will die'. Which sounds morbid, but it's not, to me it's completely liberating because it can't get worse from there. You have that thought and you go, 'Okay, let's get to work'. So that's a piece of advice too, just remember that every day when you wake up, puts things in perspective.

NP: That seems like a wonderful moment on which to end our evening. Thank you so much for coming.

[Applause]