

on writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST





Herb Sargent 1923 — 2005

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

There was a saying among screenwriters in the 1930s and '40s: "Beginning writers borrow, experienced writers steal." But we were *inspired* by *The New Yorker*. We are adding a new feature called *The Back Page* where we will be publishing written pieces or cartoons by various Guild members. *The Back Page* begins with *Contents* by Herb Gardner.

This issue also launches a new look for the magazine. We are pleased to welcome graphic designer Tom Beckham to our staff. And we extend our appreciation to Barbara Sproul Gardner for allowing us to use Herb Gardner's unique cityscapes as an integral part of the cover design.

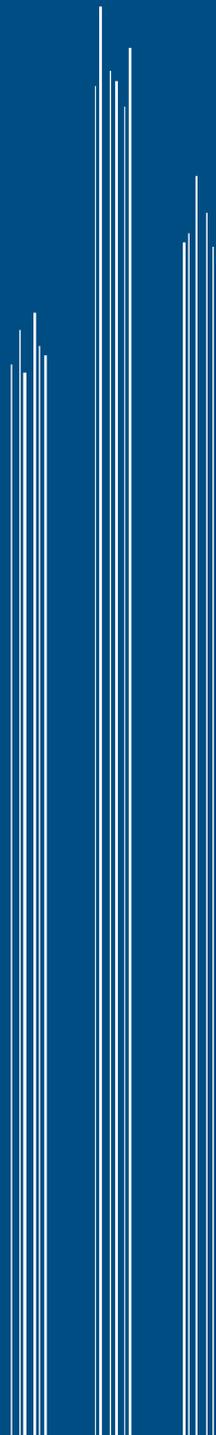
In this issue, Wes Anderson and David O. Russell talk about writing and directing, and Tony Kushner and James Schamus talk about film and theater.

—Arlene Hellerman

Front cover illustration by Herb Gardner.

Wes Anderson
AND David O. Russell

NEW YORK CITY — SEPTEMBER 28, 2004



ON WRITING: You guys have been friends for quite a while, what do you see in each other's work?

ANDERSON: David's work is totally original, instantly recognizable. In some cases, it's really funny with a sense of humor that works for me and characters I'm interested in. And then in other cases—as with his first movie—strange and sad and weirdly haunting...

ON WRITING: You mean *Spanking the Monkey*.

ANDERSON: Yeah. With *Three Kings*, there's a political idea I can get behind, a collection of political ideas, and an incredible story. It's like an old-fashioned adventure movie being told on the surface, but it has something to say that's more complex than the traditional adventure movie.

RUSSELL: Wes, from when I first saw *Bottle Rocket*, I was captivated by the sensibility. I would say that the sense I most relate to in Wes' work is the exuberance in *Rushmore* and in *Bottle Rocket*, and the passion of those characters for the things they focus on, which I very much relate to personally. I think it's a bigger risk to put into a movie what you love than what you hate.

ON WRITING: Why is that?

RUSSELL: I don't know. For some reason, criticism, ridicule and humiliation seem to sell magazines. It seems to sell TV shows and movies. You'd probably say happy endings are easy. I think a sad ending can be just as cheap as a happy ending and just as clichéd, especially in independent cinema.

ON WRITING: Now, when you say independent, both of your films—

ANDERSON: —Yeah, they were both in studios.

ON WRITING: So what is that label about?

ANDERSON: I don't know. I never even think about that.

RUSSELL: You just do what you do. I think you can have an independent sensibility.

ON WRITING: What is that?

RUSSELL: It's a sensibility that is not conventional. It needs to be lovingly marketed. You can't just put it up on 500 screens or 1,000 screens and have Siskel—God rest his soul—have Ebert say, "I had a great time with this picture, go see it." Some of the movies I've loved over the last few years haven't made a whole lot of money.

ANDERSON: Yeah. If you do have Siskel—

RUSSELL: —God rest his soul.

ANDERSON: And or—

ON WRITING: —Ebert.

ANDERSON: —And you put it in 2,000 theaters and market it—there are some movies where people have to get prepared to even be open to them.

RUSSELL: Yeah, exactly.

ANDERSON: They need to absorb them over time.

ON WRITING: I remember when *Rushmore* first came out and everybody was saying, "You've got to see this movie." By the time I saw it, I was expecting some weird, bizarre, crazy—

RUSSELL: That can ruin things also. And it's ultimately just so subjective. What kills me about a lot of critics or opinions is when they're stated like it's the God's eye view. Well, that's your opinion. What do you have, three orders of the French Royal Legion of Honor that says you're the voice of God? Some of my favorite movies just go under the radar. So you can't really worry about that.

ANDERSON: The other thing is, I'm sure if you screen *I Heart Huckabees*—which, by the way, I just saw and loved so many things about it—it's unlike anything you've ever seen before. People

are going to have completely different reactions, and most of their reactions are going to have to do with *them*. And everybody's reaction is right, basically. If you show your movie to 25 friends, everybody's going to say something different and they're going to contradict each other and it's going to be totally confusing. You can learn something from the whole process, but there is no answer to any of it. With *Rushmore*, we had a test screening and it seemed to play pretty well. It seemed fine, it was good. And afterwards I went to Joe Roth and said, "What do you think?" He said, "I think about two-thirds of the movie went over the audience's heads because there wasn't enough incident and that was why there was the mild applause at the end and the numbers aren't going to be very strong."

RUSSELL: Oh my God.

ANDERSON: I said, "Joe, what are you talking about? They were laughing. Wait and see." And about 15 minutes later they came out, the numbers were terrible. And he had loved the movie, Joe Roth, he was the guy who green lit it.

RUSSELL: But so many great movies are like that.

ANDERSON: Yeah, but it was like the things that happened felt like they weren't happening.

ON WRITING: So what happened when it tested horribly? Were you able to keep it the way it was?

ANDERSON: Yeah. Before we tested it he told me that the movie was ready to be released and we were going to test it to figure out how to release it. I think he learned what was going to happen with it in that evening.

ON WRITING: But did that scare the shit out of you when it tested so badly? Did it shake your confidence?

RUSSELL: No, it always feels good, doesn't it? Nothing like standing with your backer who's gone in on your movie with you—

ANDERSON: You know what? I didn't feel bad about it—I didn't feel great, I was surprised at how bad the numbers were—but when we made *Bottle Rocket* we tested it over and over and the numbers stayed the same. The numbers were terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible. Every single time they were as bad as it gets. But the audience reaction did change. You could feel the movie not working and then working more and more. I remember Cameron Crowe was at the last screening we had and the audience was more like students. And we came out and we got a 27.

ON WRITING: What's a 27?

ANDERSON: It's bad.

RUSSELL: 27 out of 100.

ANDERSON: It's an F. A strong F.

RUSSELL: Where was this?

ANDERSON: In Westwood. But the movie ended, Cameron Crowe came over to me and said, "Congratulations, this movie is funny. It's got a rock sensibility," which made me feel good. I was happy to hear it had a rock sensibility.

RUSSELL: He's the only one who's officially allowed to confer that.

ANDERSON: Yeah. He has the pedigree to anoint it as having a rock sensibility. And I felt really good and then they handed me the report card of a 27. So then I made it one of my missions in life to never get numbers on movies anymore.

RUSSELL: Original movies don't test well. If it's different in any way or original you can forget about it.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

RUSSELL: But with *Huckabees*, we played it in San Francisco and didn't do numbers. We did a focus

group and just questioned the audience, which you learn a lot from.

ON WRITING: So do screenings help you in filmmaking?

ANDERSON: Well one thing you can say is, “Did everybody understand that when he comes back inside he’s already been....”

RUSSELL: It could be something you’ve been obsessing about that isn’t an issue at all.

ON WRITING: It’s interesting, because even though the style can vary, there’s still a craft that exists. *I Heart Huckabees*, whether someone likes it or not, is a well-crafted film. The same thing with *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. I thought *The Royal Tenenbaums* was an incredibly well-crafted movie, as was *Rushmore*. So there’s a difference between, “I didn’t get it and it’s shit,” versus “I didn’t get it but it’s—”

ANDERSON: But there are movies that are beautifully crafted that I just hate.

ON WRITING: Like what?

ANDERSON: Well, I can’t think of any right now. I remember reading something by Michael Chapman, a cinematographer, who was talking about a movie shot by [Vittorio] Storaro—maybe it was *Julia*—which, he said, was so beautifully lit that it absolutely destroyed the film. It sort of sucked every bit of spontaneity and life out of it. It was so perfectly arranged and—

RUSSELL: I think she’s talking about a different way of crafting it.

ANDERSON: If you say a John Cassavetes movie is beautifully crafted then I agree with the whole concept. But a John Cassavetes movie is, you might have half of the monologue blocked by the guy’s head and you only see his ear. Something like that.

RUSSELL: What I take that to mean is that it’s not sloppy. That it’s carefully put together. It’s well thought out. The performances, the shots, the script. However one deems it, it’s thoughtfully done and interestingly done.

ON WRITING: Actually it’s interesting that you responded visually, Wes, because I was talking completely about the script.

ANDERSON: So if you were talking about the script then I blew the whole thing.

RUSSELL: I’m sure you make that script just how you want it to be. I mean, you go over it and you go over it. I do the same thing.

ANDERSON: Well, one thing that’s good about some producers I’ve worked with, in terms of helping with the script, 90 percent of what makes them good is they just keep saying, “Okay there’s more to do.” There are some producers who would probably say much earlier along, “Great, it’s great,” and start talking about casting. Then there are other producers like Jim Brooks—who Owen [Wilson] and I worked with on *Bottle Rocket*—his thing was, “Keep going, just keep going.” We’d have spent a year, we’d show him what we had and he’d say, “Great. And so it begins, and so it begins.”

RUSSELL: And you’re saying, “No, we thought this was, ‘And so it ends.’”

ANDERSON: Exactly.

RUSSELL: “Now we have the end and you give us the money.”

ANDERSON: Jim’s thing at every phase of making a film is to shock you with his sudden, “And so it begins.”

RUSSELL: Oh, does he say that at different points?

ANDERSON: Oh, yes.

RUSSELL: That's a great line.

ANDERSON: I think right before you're about to start mixing—

RUSSELL: —“And so it begins.”

ANDERSON: “And so it begins.”

RUSSELL: That's always the case, right?

ANDERSON: And it's a good lesson.

RUSSELL: I would keep working on a script forever. At some point you have to stop.

ANDERSON: Right, there's a point you have to stop. Jim would say we're not going to make it worse, but maybe you could lose your enthusiasm eventually.

RUSSELL: You can make it worse, actually. I disagree with that. I think you can start devouring your young. You can overthink it.

ON WRITING: So there's a distinction between “killing your darlings” versus “devouring your young.”

ANDERSON: I think it's whether or not you eat them after they're dead.

RUSSELL: Like in the Goya painting.

ON WRITING: Killing your darlings is a good thing.

ANDERSON: I don't know if I've done that.

ON WRITING: Really? You've never like written something that you absolutely loved and Jim Brooks came along and said, “It doesn't work, get rid of it?”

ANDERSON: Well then it's not my darling anymore.

ON WRITING: Oh.

ANDERSON: Maybe you realize it's not that great, or it's something you fell in love with that doesn't stick with you. What do you think, David?

RUSSELL: I think Wes is saying that it switches from a darling to a forgotten stepchild somewhere in the process of Jim Brooks saying it doesn't work.

ANDERSON: Somewhere right around before you kill it.

ON WRITING: I want to get back to something you said before, David—which is kind of related—the idea that it's a bigger risk to put what you love into a movie than what you hate. The existential questions in *I Heart Huckabees* were very personal to you....

RUSSELL: It's stuff I've thought about and read about and practiced for nearly 25 years. It came from my own experience, and then from Robert Thurman in college.

ON WRITING: Robert Thurman was your teacher at Amherst College and he's a scholar of Indo-Tibetan studies and also comparative religious studies.

RUSSELL: Yeah, he's into the ontological questions, the questions about being and reality. So doing the movie was a bit of a “Geronimo.” Do you find it's a little bit of a *Geronimo* when you go to do something, Wes?

ANDERSON: Whatever you're going to do, Yeah.

ON WRITING: What do you mean by that?

RUSSELL: *Geronimo*. You say, I like this. I have passion for this. I don't know what this is going to

be but it tickles me, it gives me energy. I don't know exactly how it can work out. It's not the safest choice in the world, but here we go.

ANDERSON: And I'm about to say, the next two years of my life are going to be all about this.

RUSSELL: Three.

ANDERSON: Yeah, it's three. And you have no idea, because you can be wrong.

RUSSELL: You can never be wrong about your passion, though. The fact that this is what you want and it came from your heart.

ANDERSON: Right. But you can be wrong about whether or not you can do it.

RUSSELL: Do it as well as one might like or you might like.

ON WRITING: Have you ever stopped midstream?

RUSSELL: I did that. The script I wrote before *Huckabees*. I wrote another script for Jason Schwartzman.

ANDERSON: With the same theme in a way.

RUSSELL: Sort of the same theme. It was about a Zendo on the Upper East Side that I went to for four years and the hub of people who went there. You had stockbrokers, doctors, janitors at this Zendo—they'd come every night to take off their coats and investigate their consciousness. And I thought, that's funny—and it's also stuff I'm very, very invested in. I wrote the script and I just thought, you know it doesn't have enough of a story. It's funny, it's interesting, it's filled with great stuff. But it didn't have enough of a story for me. So I had to make the phone call. I called Jason [Schwartzman], woke him up at his mother's

house at six in the morning—I wanted him to hear it from me, not from the agent, that we weren't making that movie. It was right on the cusp on going into production. So I put that movie in the drawer and that freed up the unconscious, and two weeks later I had a dream about a lady following me. But for metaphysical reasons, not for criminal reasons.

ON WRITING: And that provided the basis for *I Heart Huckabees*.

RUSSELL: Yeah. Did I tell you this, Wes?

ANDERSON: No, it was a dream?

RUSSELL: Yeah, it was a dream. And I thought oh, that just tickles me to no end and there's my story. It gave it more shape.

ANDERSON: I heard *Three Women*—

RUSSELL: —Was a dream?

ANDERSON: Yeah.

RUSSELL: I heard that, too.

ANDERSON: The whole movie.

RUSSELL: How about [Federico] Fellini who used to just make it up as he went along.

ANDERSON: How can you even do that?

RUSSELL: No dialogue.

ANDERSON: “Let's figure that out later.”

RUSSELL: “Marcello, say this. Just do this to this woman. Touch her coat and—”

ANDERSON: “—Count.” It's like a silent film. He's making a silent film and then he's going to figure out some good things to say in a relaxed situation.

RUSSELL: What's your favorite Fellini movie?

ANDERSON: I have three favorites. My three favorites are *Nights of Cabiria*, *8½* and *Amarcord*. What do you like?

RUSSELL: *Amarcord*, *Satyricon* and *La Dolce Vita*.

ANDERSON: I tried to figure out how the script of *Amarcord* was structured. What happens when? How do you steal from *Amarcord*? Let's figure out how to write a movie based on *Amarcord* which works so well, and every single scene seems like he had a great scene here that he wanted to do and he had a great image there that he wanted to get. How did he make that work? I have no idea. I went through the whole movie trying to figure it out. I made a list of the scenes and said, this far into the movie this happens. Ten minutes in when they tell us we're supposed to do such and such, he had a bull standing in a mist. And I couldn't figure out anything. I think Woody Allen has some of that same kind of structure. I think maybe it's the jokes that make it seem as if he can do anything. And with Fellini it's just the overwhelming dreaminess of it or something, that force of the images maybe. I don't know what. But *Nights of Cabiria* is a much more traditional kind of narrative.

ON WRITING: Do you structure out your films? Do you pretty much know everything that's going to happen?

ANDERSON: The way I work is more like making a collage, having some characters, sort of having some sections of the movie. I know there's a part of the movie we're going to be in this place and part of the movie we're going to be in that place, part of the movie where this thing's going to happen.... But we might have this one scene written that's on page 85 and we don't know what happens between here and there but—it's that sort of thing. Do you go in sequence when you're writing it, David?

RUSSELL: No, not always. If something inspires me, I'll write it out of sequence. Especially if I'm stuck. It's nice to jump ahead and write

something that will get you excited again. I do a lot of outlining. Do you do a lot of outlining?

ANDERSON: A lot of outlining. A lot of anything. Just trying anything. For me it takes at least a year, I think, of just writing. How long does it take you to write?

RUSSELL: 18 months.

ANDERSON: 18 months. Yeah, so it's probably that long.

RUSSELL: In this case of an ensemble—

ON WRITING:—You mean with *Huckabees*.

RUSSELL: Yeah. I took each character and outlined their arc left to right on a dry erase board. This guy's going to go through all these things. She's going to go through these things. These are the ideas I had for these characters. Where could these two intersect? These two I already know are going to intersect because they're going to become friends and this one's going to become the lover here. But are there other places they could intersect? And then you start packing it down into a story.

ON WRITING: So what was it for each of you that made you say *Geronimo* to *Huckabees* and *Life Aquatic*?

RUSSELL: For my film it was that I wanted to spend time with characters who were passionate about these spiritual or political investigations. People who would take unconventional positions, and that's what would fuel them through their lives. In some weird way, they're like the saints from 500 years ago. They're just going to go with that thing. And I like spending time with these ideas about infinity. They're ideas I want to

understand more. Bob Thurman talks about this. Philosophers talk about this. Okay, what does it mean if you really try to apply it to your life all day every day? That excited me and I knew I was going to learn personally by spending so much time with it.

ANDERSON: And these are pilgrims and you're going to be a pilgrim when you're making the movie.

RUSSELL: Exactly. That's a good way to put it.

ANDERSON: It seemed like you completely dove into that in the process of making the movie. You totally threw yourself into the world of thinking about these things and pushing the envelopes. Which is another thing I love about the movie, I can feel you pushing it all the way and saying there's not a boundary to where you're going to go with this stuff. It's like there's nobody holding it back.

ON WRITING: Did you have a passion about *The Life Aquatic*?

ANDERSON: Yeah. Probably a few things. About 14 years ago I wrote a two-paragraph short story that was a description of a character and this whole sort of setting. I just had it in my notebook somewhere. Owen had really liked it and we always talked about it. It's really an overwritten two paragraphs, it's like an embarrassing couple of paragraphs to read. But the more I thought about it, the more I was interested in it. And then I read some stuff about [Jacques] Cousteau and started watching Cousteau films at the Museum of Television and Radio and I got really caught up in this character of Cousteau—which in the end, the movie is not Cousteau. The movie has got some of his spirit but it's also a bunch of other people who I got to know that are mixed into it and just made up. But it was really mainly this character, this person who

has this exuberance and he's unstoppable, he's a superstar and he's courageous. Cousteau was in the French Resistance and then he invented scuba and bought a ship—or he got somebody to buy a ship for him—and then he dressed it the way he wanted it. And he gave everybody red caps and cast this group of guys and started making these insane, wild films. He's just a really captivating character. In the end the movie ended up being, by the time I got to making this thing, more about what it's like to make a movie because it is about somebody making something.

RUSSELL: And your love for the sea.

ANDERSON: My love of the sea.

RUSSELL: Your love for the sea was also in *Rushmore*.

ANDERSON: Yeah, but you know what was in *Rushmore*? My interest in Cousteau. That's where that stuff came from, I think.

RUSSELL: “When a man has an opportunity...”

ANDERSON: “When a man, for whatever reason, has the opportunity to—” do something.

RUSSELL: “To explore,” or something.

ANDERSON: “...he has no right to keep it to himself.”

ON WRITING: What is that?

RUSSELL: It's the quote that was handwritten in the book that Max Fischer finds in the library and that's what leads him to the teacher, to the Rosemary Cross character.

ON WRITING: It's a quote from Jacques Cousteau?

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ON WRITING: And what was it?

ANDERSON: I don't remember. "When a man for whatever reason has the opportunity to do something or another he has no right to keep it to himself."

RUSSELL: "—To have an amazing adventure, he has no right to keep it to himself."

ANDERSON: Yeah. To be brilliant and amazing.

RUSSELL: This is probably why I consider Wes and I kindred spirits, my description of what drew me to these characters is not unlike what he described in terms of exuberance. And I've said that I think the most daring thing about Huckabees is its optimism—Jon Brion describes it as a joy. He's the composer. He said there's a joy in the movie, there's a joy in the characters and in the writing and in the music. But what just occurred to me when you were describing Jacques Cousteau—and I think about the guys in my movie—is I think we are both Tom Sawyer versus Huck Finn. You know what I'm talking about?

ANDERSON: Yeah.

RUSSELL: Tom Sawyer is the one who says, "You go get the dead cat, you go get the hats. I'll get the boat." And everybody's saying, "What are we doing again?" Tom says, "We're going to Devil's Island and this is what's going to go down. We're going to find some spirits." Tom Sawyer believes in magic. There's a certain belief in magic and there's a quest. Huck Finn is the down-to-earth guy who's just going to get shit done.

ANDERSON: The tradition in movies is the main guy is the Huck Finn and there's the Tom Sawyer character, but he's not the main guy. And I think in our movies most of the time the Tom Sawyer is the main guy and there is no Huck Finn and that makes it a weirder kind of movie.

RUSSELL: Although Mark Wahlberg is a little bit of a Huck Finn in my movie.

ANDERSON: He's a little bit of another Tom Sawyer.

RUSSELL: Yes, he is.

ANDERSON: That's two Tom Sawyers sitting at the table.

RUSSELL: You're right.

ANDERSON: That's why it goes so wild.

RUSSELL: He has some Huck Finn in him. Give me at least that much. But at the end of the book, I remember, Jim is locked in a shed and the slaves have been freed which Huck doesn't know and Tom chooses not to tell him because he wants to have another adventure. Which actually pissed me off when I realized it at the end of the book. So Tom says we have to do this elaborate thing where we're going to tunnel Jim out of that shed and we're going to take him in a boat under cover of night. And finally Huck realizes, wait a minute, he was free the whole time, we could have just walked him out of there. Tom's saying, "You're missing the whole point here. We had a magical adventure." And that is the magic in a funny way that points to the heart of that book. Because the heart of that book is two guys escaping, which is genius. They escape civilization. They're on a raft. They're floating down the river. And they stop and they dip their toe into society and give us a little of *National Geographic*, here's a view of the world. Look at this town. Whoa! Weird. Back on the raft. Or look at these mean people. Back on the raft. And you see hatred, racism, all the terrible things of society. The scam-meisters who join them. But the conundrum is, the paradox is, they live the free life as fugitives, as outsiders.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

RUSSELL: And that's how they have had special freedom that is unparalleled in any other way.

So for you it's your guys literally in a boat going out to the ocean and living as these sort of outlaw oceanographers. And for me there are people in society living in some other realm of reality getting into infinity as a daily habit.

ANDERSON: Stepping out of their lives to look at their lives and look at everything around them in a way you don't normally do.

RUSSELL: They're on a raft. They're on a magic raft without going into the water in my movie.

ANDERSON: That's good.

RUSSELL: The other thing you made me think of, if I may, is when you mentioned there was something you wrote 14 years ago—because the germ of the existential detectives was from a short film I wrote—did you know this?

ANDERSON: No.

RUSSELL: —Twelve to 13 years ago when I was living in Manhattan. And it got financed by the New York State Council for the Arts. They gave me \$20,000 and the NEA gave me \$20,000. Back in the day when they would do that. It was about a guy who had a Chinese restaurant and he had a very small microphone that was concealed on every table. And he would listen very carefully to every table and write insanely personal fortunes to each person. He ends up getting involved in these people's lives as a kind of existential detective. Which was my first attempt to use all these ideas I'd been playing with. And I took the money and I used it to make *Spanking the Monkey* instead.

ANDERSON: Oh, you never made the film.

RUSSELL: I tried. I didn't feel I made the film work. I didn't want to make it as a short. I wanted to make it as a feature. I spent two years trying to grow it into a feature and I said, "Fuck, this isn't working. I'm getting older. Time is going by. I'm never going to make a feature." I went on jury

duty and I was pissed off. My girlfriend had broken up with me. And *Spanking the Monkey* just came out. Like one thing, all at once. And I said wow, that's really twisted and sick and so different. Not a lot of magic there. I could have built a whole career based on that. A lot of people ask me, "Who are you? We don't know who you are." And I say, "That's one part of me. I make two movies and I can't just say, 'That's me, I go in that shoebox.'"

ANDERSON: Well, as soon as there were two movies there was no shoebox because those movies are so different from each other. And then by the time you had three movies there was really no shoebox. Although having said that, there is a voice. There's a sensibility but it's not a small shoebox. It's a big shoebox.

ON WRITING: Are you in a shoebox, Wes? Because I think it's true that David's movies are very different. But I think your movies are more consistent.

ANDERSON: Smaller shoebox.

RUSSELL: Smaller shoebox.

ANDERSON: Two shoeboxes floating down the river.

RUSSELL: Yes.

ON WRITING: I would say there's more of a consistent style to your movies, and there is a style to David's but it's a more, as you said, a voice. If you look at *Spanking the Monkey* and *Flirting with Disaster*, they are very different movies. Whereas I think *Rushmore* and *Royal Tenenbaums*, there's this similarity there. There's a feeling that's similar.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

RUSSELL: It's safe to say.

ANDERSON: There's a lot of overlap.

ON WRITING: I wouldn't say overlap.

ANDERSON: There's a certain amount of overlap.

RUSSELL: It's a consistent tone.

ON WRITING: Where do you see overlap?

ANDERSON: I don't even want to go into it.

RUSSELL: Yeah, you don't do that to yourself. I can do that to myself, too, but I'm not going to do it in print.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ON WRITING: Why?

RUSSELL: I'll say to journalists, "Look, believe me, I could tell you everything that's wrong with this movie."

ON WRITING: Wait, is overlap a bad thing?

ANDERSON: I can tell you the scene in *The Royal Tenenbaums* that is a scene in *Rushmore* that is a scene in *Bottle Rocket* because when we're writing this stuff we say, "What needs to happen here? In the other one what we did was this."

RUSSELL: Oh, that's hilarious.

ANDERSON: "Well, I guess we'll just have the guy walk in and it'll be sort of like that." And then we'll temp it with the same music.

ON WRITING: So you've done that.

ANDERSON: I've already shown my hand.

RUSSELL: No he hasn't. No you haven't. You've kept your cards close to the vest.

ON WRITING: No, that's good to know because I think it's something a lot of writers want to do that they feel they can't.

RUSSELL: Writers all use tricks. For *Spanking the Monkey*, I used the "I've got two projects" trick:

I wrote it as a diversion from a project I thought was more important.

ON WRITING: And for *Huckabees*, as you talked about earlier, you had to let go of the film you'd written to allow the better movie to emerge.

RUSSELL: Yeah. It's all about figuring out just what you need to do to get the screenplay written. A muse is good. It could be someone outside the loop of your ordinary contacts or business who somehow frees and inspires you. It's a blessing.



BIOGRAPHIES



DAVID O. RUSSELL wrote and directed the films *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), *Flirting with Disaster* (1996) and *Three Kings* (1999). He co-wrote and directed *I Heart Huckabees* (2004).

Spanking the Monkey premiered at the 1994 Sundance Film Festival where it won the Audience Award. The film also won Independent Spirit Awards for Best First Feature and Best First Screenplay. *Flirting With Disaster* received Independent Spirit Award nominations for Best Director and Best Screenplay. *Three Kings* was awarded Best Feature and Russell was awarded Best Director by the Boston Critics Association. The film was also nominated for a Writers Guild of America Award for Best Original Screenplay.

In 2002, Russell was the first director honored by New York's Museum of Modern Art's series "Works in Progress," which focuses on a new generation of filmmakers.



WES ANDERSON is the director and co-writer of *Bottle Rocket* (1994), *Rushmore* (1998), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004). His next film is *Fantastic Mr. Fox* based on the book by Roald Dahl.

James Schamus
AND Tony Kushner

DECEMBER 2, 2004 — NEW YORK CITY



SCHAMUS: I wanted to ask you about *Angels in America* and the transition process from the theater to the screen. I chatted briefly with George Wolfe last week, and we were talking about how that transition changes the material.

KUSHNER: Even though I wrote the screenplay, I really feel that it was Mike's film.

ON WRITING: Mike Nichols.

KUSHNER: Yeah. And I feel, without any sort of false modesty, that it's his accomplishment. I didn't think it would work. I really don't think I'm a screenwriter in any kind of real sense, maybe I'll become one as I go along. I'm beginning to get certain things about cutting and the speed with which you can transition from one moment to the next in film. I'm working on a script with [Steven] Spielberg now, but I still feel that my work is very playwrighterly and I'm very much indebted to dialogue, and that there's some sort of essence of screenwriting as a process—that I don't think cinematically, that I think theatrically. Altman said, when we were working on *Angels* as a film—

ON WRITING: Wait, who?

KUSHNER: Robert Altman and I worked on it first. And he said, "The problem is, this is written like a screenplay for the stage and when we turn it into a screenplay it's going to be very ordinary." What's interesting about it on stage is that it's got all these short scenes and goes in 71 different locations and has all that sort of cinematic stuff in it. I suppose that's true, although it's not an invention of mine. I'm influenced by Brecht, and Brecht used a lot of cinema—that montage style that was really tremendously influenced by cinema.

ON WRITING: So Altman said what made the play unusual was it made demands on the stage that are similar to a screenplay's, but when you take those demands and put them back, then the screenplay becomes pedestrian?

KUSHNER: Well, it just becomes ordinary screenwriting. Things like, there's a scene in the second act of *Millennium* of the first part of *Angels* where two couples have a fight simultaneously. I thought of it as kind of a string quartet when I was writing it for the stage and you have to have both couples on the stage at the same time and it's very, very fast and it's really effective that way. But it is actually nothing new in terms of film. They frequently will have conversations going on in two different locations and intercut.

SCHAMUS: And it's interesting, there's a wonderful essay by [Sergei] Eisenstein where he talks about film in the '20s and argues that, while there's no such thing as Japanese cinema, for him, Japan is a truly cinematic culture because of its Kabuki theater and what he fancifully called the "hieroglyph."

ON WRITING: The hieroglyph?

SCHAMUS: He meant ideograms, what he called the copula or the copulation of images. For instance, the word "to sing" in Japanese is the image of a bird together with a mouth. It's like montage just like in Kabuki theater. So the cinematographic principle is, for Eisenstein, located in the theater.

KUSHNER: Yeah.

SCHAMUS: And this is a big moment for him. He came up through theater at a moment when there was a battle between [Constantin] Stanislavski on the one hand, and [Vsevolod] Meyerhold on the other: was theatrical art going to be centered in the recreation of a naturalist psychology inside the characters, or was it going to be recreated through spectacle? So he makes his way—as he put it in the essay—through theater to cinema, but precisely by finding the cinematic in the theater. And what he says is he made these big theatrical flops, because there was too much reality in them—like cinema. So he did an adaptation of a Jack London story which included a character who's a prizefighter. And at a certain moment in the play they put the ring up

and have a fight. It's a great fight, but it wasn't good theater. But it would have worked in the cinema. So he established his own identity as a filmmaker precisely by finding film in the theater. And Tony, one of the things you mentioned, which I think is so important, is one of the things he never dealt with much, which is dialogue and its relationship, not only just to real dialogue—people actually talking to each other—but the kind of traditions of theatrical dialogue and presentation.

KUSHNER: I think it's one of the reasons that *Angels* finally worked on television. And I don't know that it would work as a feature film. When I originally worked with Altman, the thing was still on Broadway and it was still this new play, and I think partly for that reason we decided we had to reinvent it—which made it very, very difficult going because I worked on it for eight years and I didn't want to reinvent it. I wanted to work with Altman because I revere him, but I didn't know how to do it. And I found the idea of writing for cinema, for a big screen, really overwhelmingly intimidating and alien. The idea that you can describe anything and then find some way to do it cinematically was not like freedom to me, it was like a nightmare. It completely stymied me. And going to television, what you get is this box, which is very much like a proscenium arch, it's just very close. It's still a medium of talking heads.

SCHAMUS: Yeah, that's exactly right. As a medium, television is so much friendlier to the spoken word than movies. Even in the most action-packed TV show there's a lot of speech, a lot of talking and that speech takes place, as Tony said, in your room. So the dialogue is quite often actually molded, even just subconsciously, towards people in the room. And it's a very intimate kind of speech which the cinema has a very difficult time reproducing.

KUSHNER: There's also this weird thing about expectation. I think audiences are fairly sophisticated and they go to any medium with a vast history behind them of the experience of that

medium. I think it's also, there's a claustrophobia—which is Andrew Sarris' word for it—in the theatrical experience that television recapitulates. You're in your own room, there's something very sort of enclosed about it, whereas most movie auditoriums are big and you feel like you're in a big public arena. I think you go to the cinema expecting a degree of spectacle. Though certainly there are films that work beautifully like *The Ice Storm* that are not about huge spectacles.

SCHAMUS: And it's also the medium. What's interesting, though, is why *Ice Storm* would not have worked as well as a television show or as a play. And the reason it is so precisely a film is one of the things I don't think even Ang [Lee] first noticed in the making of it, but in the entire last reel of the film—we're talking about 20 minutes of the movie—there's only one or two phrases spoken. And it's essentially a silent film. I mean, it's not silent, the sound is on, it's very deep and rich. But it becomes a silent film.

KUSHNER: And the imagery outside and the kid—well, it's Tobey Maguire, pre-*Spiderman*.

SCHAMUS: Reading a Marvel Comics book.

KUSHNER: Reading a Marvel Comics book, that's funny.

SCHAMUS: And then his peer from *Lord of the Rings* is out getting electrocuted.

ON WRITING: Oh, I didn't realize it was Elijah Wood. But that brings up a question about the way a musical score can affect screenwriting. When I think about *The Ice Storm*—especially that last reel—I think of the musical score.

SCHAMUS: Yeah, we ran score continuously for almost 16 minutes. It really kind of collapsed out of language into the image, into sound and music.

ON WRITING: When you wrote the script for *The Ice Storm* how did you write that last reel? And is it the third act?

SCHAMUS: No. Anybody in the film business that starts talking about acts, I press my eject button.

ON WRITING: Really? You don't do three acts?

SCHAMUS: I don't do three acts. I don't even do five acts which, by the way, is probably more legitimate. At Focus Features we've banished the word "act." No, unlike writing for theater, where I really think it is a playwright's medium, writing for the screen, I think, is a purely instrumental kind of writing. No matter how great a genius you might think yourself and how well compensated and all those wonderful things, to me it is essentially writing an appeal to other people to spend money—it's a collection of suggestions.

ON WRITING: Was that your experience on the movies you wrote that Ang Lee directed?

SCHAMUS: No, but I was also a producer on those movies. And it's a collaboration that's quite different. Although I love writing as a screenwriter, too. I know that this is controversial, but when somebody says, "Get me rewrite," I love doing that. To me it's craft, it's work—it's like engineering, the way engineering is also an art. I enjoy it. But what it isn't, except rarely, is what you do in the theater where there's a voice that, if you're doing great theater, has to be there.

KUSHNER: I think in a way the two processes are exactly the mirror image of one another, because in the theater you begin with a commodity. You begin with an object. You begin with a text that's set. It will change and it has an elasticity, but the one thing that will remain when the event is done is the book, the text, the script. And then you go from that into bringing it to life and making it into this completely unfixed form that will change radically. It's the thing that drama critics never, ever write about or acknowledge because it would make their jobs impossible—which would be a great thing—so they protect themselves by not talking about it. But anybody who goes to the theater regularly who's ever seen a play twice within two or three weeks sees that the play

changes radically every night in relationship to the audience. The audience rewrites the play in collaboration with the actors. It really can do that profoundly. You could have an event that's unbelievably hot 60 percent of the time and 40 percent of the time is dead cold. It can just change immensely. And then of course it's gone. And it's the exact opposite in a way with the making of a film, everything is working towards a more or less completely finished thing that's fixed.

SCHAMUS: On the other hand, I've often said that one of the things about writing in the studio situation or for television development, you're enjoined to do a very specific task which is to write a document that is so airtight that even a director can't fuck it up. That really is the job.

KUSHNER: Good luck.

SCHAMUS: And by the way, it is an impressive thing when the task is done well, when really good screenwriters write scripts that simply "require shooting." But it does mean that there's no room in there—

KUSHNER: —For invention.

SCHAMUS: —Or when invention comes, as it should, then it throws up enormous problems because you've taken out that one block and the rest of the edifice might fall apart.

KUSHNER: Then again, it's interesting, I had tried to write a screenplay for Jonathan Demme a few years ago of a children's book that I really adore called *The Pushcart War*. Huge deal for me when I was a kid, I loved it and I always thought it would make a great movie—and maybe somebody will make a great movie out of it. It's actually so wonderful in the writing. The plot is very small, it's just enormously witty, it's written as a fake documentary of a pushcart strike. And I screwed it up. The screenplay was hundreds of pages long and was the worst thing I've ever written. And I think it was probably the most miserable writing experience of my life. It had nothing to do with Jonathan.

We never spoke about it. But just trying to write, I'd never been on a film set in my entire life. I had no idea how to film anything, I didn't know how to take a snapshot. And I was trying to describe a movie while I was writing it and it was endless. I ended up lying the whole time because usually people use POV and blah, blah, blah and I had no idea what I was doing. And when I sat down to work with Mike [Nichols] on *Angels*, I had sent him the first 20 or 30 pages with all of that crap in it and he said, "You don't really know anything about screenwriting. "I'd already told him I'd never even been on a film set. He said, "Just stop it. I know how to make the movie. You do what you feel comfortable with and I'll fill in the blanks. I'll figure it out." And the difference now in the script I'm doing with Spielberg, he encourages me to do anything I want but then it's important to him—I don't know if other people working with him have had this experience—to go back and actually put it all in the script. He seems to want the working script, the starting script to be a very close reflection of what is going to—

SCHAMUS: —Well, he's a very organized filmmaker who works with a team. He really moves very quickly; for running gigantic Hollywood productions he's notoriously efficient. He knows what he wants and he knows how to use the script as a great tool to communicate to the crew. Because that's another function of it. In a way you described the twin poles very well, because you can't be the director, otherwise no director will want to make the movie. And on the other hand if it's too lost in space you're not describing a movie.

KUSHNER: Yeah.

SCHAMUS: Because the form we use for screenplays was developed by producers. It was really Thomas Ince, who was one of the great early producers. For the one- or two-reel films they'd

just say, "Here's this story, it's basically the gypsy has kidnapped the white girl. They give chase. They get the girl back. Okay go." As you got into three or four more reels suddenly they realized that budgeting was not just, okay we got the team, go out and make the movie. It was, well, we require elephants. We only want the elephants for one day, we don't want to have them around for the second day because they eat a lot and we have to pick up the crap. So let's put this all in script form and then break down the script so what we have is the assistant director's breakdown pages and all that kind of stuff. That language really comes from a logic of budget and production and industrial organization. So the format is a real industrial format.

ON WRITING: I know you don't like acts but I've wondered how screenplays became three acts. And it occurred to me that, when screenplays were invented in the 1920s and '30s, plays were three acts. Did that come in when talkies started?

SCHAMUS: No, it was even before that. The *How to Write a Screenplay* book, which we think of as a fairly contemporary phenomenon, you go back to the 19-teens and you've got quite a lot of *How to Write a Photoplay* books. And people made a very good living churning them out. There were script doctors all the way back then. You have to remember that, at the time narrative filmmaking started to organize itself both as an art and as an industry, the biggest question that filmmakers and theorists concerned themselves with was, how are we different from theater? The first great work of film theory was written by a German-American professor at Harvard named Hugo Munsterberg, who in his day was a hugely popular intellectual. He was one of the first people who wrote psychology books for the masses. And he's the first guy to actually sit down and write a book on, what is this as an art? How does film actually work? And as with most thinkers like Eisenstein, and really all the

way through the '40s and '50s through Andre Bazin—the beginnings of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and contemporary film theory—the big question was, what are the differences between theater and film? And one of the ways the question was answered on the film side was, there is no real difference, we're just as legitimate as they are. So Lasky's Famous Players—

ON WRITING:—Which was an early film production company that later merged with Paramount Pictures—

SCHAMUS:—And invariably other moguls would go to Broadway and raid talent and publicize this. It was wave after wave and it precedes the talkies actually.

ON WRITING: Oh, really.

SCHAMUS: Absolutely. Famous Players were famously playing long before there was sound.

ON WRITING: I want to go back and ask about something you talked about earlier, dialogue in films. Why can't modern films be more dialogue driven?

SCHAMUS: Certainly you have a lot of wonderful filmmakers and films which are filled with dialogue and it's not like they aren't dialogue driven. But the medium becomes—especially when the dialogue becomes, shall we say, text itself, which starts to get into poetry—very resistant to verbal rhetoric. But to a certain extent, in the theatrical culture that Tony is probably the strongest representative of now, characters actually can speak poetry, whereas cinema is so unforbearing.

KUSHNER: Yeah. And that's the thing. Theater

trades on the unsuccess of illusion. It's the whole point of the theater in a way that, when we talk about something as being theatrical that's what we mean. Its fakeness is an important part of the experience of watching it. And it forces you to think dialectically because you're forced to both believe and disbelieve at the same time. It's a real struggle to suspend disbelief. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in one of his lectures on Shakespeare, figures out that one of the things Shakespeare is really trafficking in is the “willed suspension of disbelief.” Coleridge is the first person, I think, who coined that phrase. But the word “willed” is what we've dropped out of it because in film, suspension of disbelief becomes not only easy but sometimes you feel almost psychotically that you're losing your grasp on what's real. I mean, when you watch *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* you see these magical things happening and you don't even think about it. You can actually see things that are literally impossible and you have to do the work in the other direction to remind yourself that such things are not possible. Whereas in theater the work is always in the direction of, I know the body is breathing and that it's going to get up and bow in a few minutes, but it's dead so I feel sad because I like that person/character.

SCHAMUS: That's right. I'm just in the middle of reading Stephen Greenblatt's book on Shakespeare.

KUSHNER: Lovely.

SCHAMUS: It's just incredible.

ON WRITING: What's it called?

SCHAMUS: *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. He talks at great length about the medieval theatrical traditions out of which Shakespeare and Elizabethan drama have come. And this, what he calls, the double consciousness of Shakespeare, always lets you know that this is theater, you can't possibly believe this and yet

you're going to believe it. In cinema, with very few exceptions, which tend to be comedy—comedy can break the illusion because it's fun, it kind of cracks it open—you can have those moments. But essentially, mainstream films don't work when they foreground one or another element in a way that says “look at what we're doing.” You have to just keep going with the flow, no matter how extravagant or extraordinary it is, you're constantly constrained in a way by keeping it real.

KUSHNER: It's interesting to think of that in terms of what you were saying earlier, because I never thought that film began as sort of the poor stepchild to theater, which was the serious art form. And you can see traces of that all the way into the '30s and '40s of a kind of, “This is a Broadway play that we're presenting with a great Broadway actor. It is high art.” This was back when that distinction really mattered to people. And if you think of the struggle to beat the theater at its own game and become a different form, perhaps they figured out one thing they could do much, much, much better than theater could ever do, which was to create more and more seamless illusions. And I think the theater then began to desperately try and go after film and to say, “Well, since we can't do magical things on stage with anything resembling the effectiveness of film, let's limit our vocabulary to those things which we can do,” you know, people sitting around talking. Because then the illusion is more or less seamless, the sort of Steppenwolf, “We can punch each other out and throw each other into a wall and if the wall is built correctly it won't do that canvas shaky thing and we won't go any further than that.” And that kind of naturalism became a sort of disease in the theater.

SCHAMUS: And I think a lot of what your work does is almost ignore the naturalist versus Brechtian split after a while. It's not an issue anymore.

KUSHNER: I think that's true in a lot of films.

SCHAMUS: But it's not obviously part of the mainstream idiom, certainly not here in the States. It's pretty rare. There are great screenplays with great dialogue and some very delicious encounters. Those do get written. But, you know, people say, “Oh, that was so realistic,” and when you look at dialogue in screenplays, people speak in more or less full sentences without the “umms” and the “ahs.” Obviously if you had real dialogue it would sound horrible even in a movie.

KUSHNER: Yeah.

SCHAMUS: But the rule by which you determine whether dialogue in a movie is good or not is how real it is. It's not how beautiful it is or how poetic it is or how moving.

ON WRITING: Isn't that a relatively recent thing that people expect? If you look at movies from the '30s and '40s and even '50s it was much more theatrical. If you look at *His Girl Friday* or any of the comedies, or even the dramas, the Fritz Lang movies or—

KUSHNER: —I think that's true and for a while that was the preserve of European filmmakers. But your work, James, and people like Spike Jonze, there's sort of a resensitization of the cinematic and audiences are responding to that.

SCHAMUS: Yeah. And what's amazing about it is, I think it has often come about through a bigger appreciation of the screenwriter. At Focus, we made *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* with Charlie Kaufman and it is mind boggling. He is one of those people who has disproved everything I've already said, which is, he is a screenwriter who has maintained his voice in the medium.

KUSHNER: In a weird way, the gestures in the script are so large that he demands a consciousness on the part of the audience that “this is written.” It’s unusual.

SCHAMUS: Though it’s the only way it works. In a funny way Charlie has to be present to the audience as a part of the experience for the experience to work as well as it does.

KUSHNER: Well, because they’re about writing. *Adaptation* is, I think, one of the great things ever about the process of writing. Especially the last part of it—I’ve had nightmares where Meryl Streep has stood in the swamp and called me a “fat loser.” It had to be Meryl Streep. And this character that you’ve created is chasing you through a swamp trying to kill you.

ON WRITING: There are people like Charlie Kaufman, David O. Russell, Wes Anderson, Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor who definitely have a voice but still the dialogue is naturalistic and the story is linear. Actually it’s something interesting to me about Charlie Kaufman’s work that there’s always a very, very strong story.

KUSHNER: I think that’s an important distinction. I used to say—I don’t know if it’s true anymore, it was before I actually wrote a screenplay—but I thought that the difference was primarily the theater is not a narrative art form. What really drives the theater forward is the dialectical, the clashing of ideas, and that what really drives most cinema is the unfolding of narrative. I don’t know, is that true do you think?

SCHAMUS: Yes.

KUSHNER: I know that I got a certain degree of hoity-toity intellectual criticism for the film of *Angels*—the right has always hated everything I do. It’s part of this idea of American relativism—

which is always a right-wing trope—that ultimately the point of any real grownup movie is, everybody’s point is equally valid and if you’re going to bust the right you also have to bust the left. Everything has to be balanced. And I would imagine that, in theater, it’s so much easier to say, “No, it’s not balanced, actually these people are wrong,” and get away with that has something to do with the fact that you’re dealing with a work of art for a larger audience in film. The aspiration of film is towards millions and millions and millions of viewers, even though you can actually make a movie for far less than you can produce a play on Broadway.

SCHAMUS: Exactly. It’s the marketing that kills you. The greatest luxury we have at Focus is that we don’t have to make a movie for everybody. In fact that’s how I define the movies we make. Our movies are precisely those movies that are not made for everyone. And what’s happening now is that you can make a movie for five dollars, but getting it released costs, on average for a studio film, \$40 million. So it’s no longer the Marxist, “Seize the means of production.” Who cares about the means? No one really needs to control the means of production. But you have to control the means of distribution and marketing. And now the costs of that have risen so high.

ON WRITING: Why?

SCHAMUS: Well, part of it is market saturation and exploitation, it’s the Miramaximization, as they say, of the specialized business. Whereas in the old days where you could make a little movie and then make 20 prints and bicycle them from theater to theater and over a half a year or a year you could make a really tidy sum, now you have to make that opening weekend. Your opening weekend has to be big so that other exhibitors outside of New York and Los Angeles take notice and book the film. And you have to follow it up very aggressively and very quickly.

ON WRITING: So a movie can’t catch on anymore?

SCHAMUS: It can, but platforming—going from a few screens to more and more and more—now has to be so much more expedited than it ever was before. You’re moving very quickly to get to that plateau where you’re catching on. You’ve got to buy more ads. You’ve got to get people into those few theaters you’ve opened in to establish your legitimacy as a potential runaway art house hit. And then from there you’ve got to move much more quickly.

KUSHNER: I’m a complete novice in the film business but I know from just watching films that I’ve loved disappear that if the money isn’t spent, and if the distributor isn’t really completely behind it, a really wonderful film can just vanish.

SCHAMUS: What I think is going to happen is, as the economics of the business shifts over to DVD and into Pay Per View and broadband distribution, you’re going to see something that’s started to happen a little bit with the book industry. They call it the theory of the long tail. Which basically has to do with virtual inventories. That is to say, you go into Barnes & Noble, the one on Broadway here in New York has about 150,000 titles. You go on BarnesandNoble.com, about two million. And because of the “other customers who bought this also liked that,” and customer reviews, oftentimes books that have been more or less out of print stay in a kind of quasi print. And then as sales pick up of these titles and other people start talking to each other, word of mouth actually starts to kick in and it picks up. So there are a lot of books that have been in print for five or six years that start to spike. And as we move into that kind of virtual inventory for films, I think you’re going to start to see audiences themselves interacting across space via the Internet and other media. And that’s going to have a big impact, I hope, on what people like me can and can’t do. Because at Focus we have to make movies that we can open. Not necessarily open on 2,000 screens, but at least open on two screens so that then we can get to 12 screens and then we get to 50 and then we can go to 800 pretty fast because there’s more stuff coming up behind us.

KUSHNER: You’re talking about technology, the thing that really excited me about my experience with *Angels* on HBO is that, I wrote a play that’s seven-and-a-half hours long in the theater—and a lot of it was cut to make it fit seven-and-a-half hours in the theater. And we made it six hours long on HBO and I was very, very worried about how they were going show it. They wanted to show it in two, three-hour blocks, which is what they did. But also because they have HBO Signature and all these channels, they showed it in all these different formats, and then it came out on DVD. Even before it came out on DVD people were TiVo-ing it and videotaping it. And there’s now this kind of—this is really sort of apropos of nothing but it is about the future a little bit—somebody like me who likes really, really long things, there’s a possibility of starting to reconsider the business of creating stage or film representations of human behavior which have always been so completely bound by what my grandmother would have called *zitsfleysh*, by the audience’s ability to sit through something. And to start to think about it the way you think about a long book. I know people who have told me they’ve watched the six hours of *Angels* 20 minutes here and then they stop and they pick up the kids and then another five minutes while they’re getting ready for dinner—the way you read a book, you pick it up and put it down and you pick up and put it down. The business of being able to actually hold an audience, it’s such a radically different idea that you suddenly begin to think about the possibility of art forms that are as discursive and digressive as the novel could be.

SCHAMUS: Absolutely. Totally. And it’s the way in which television has circled back to influence cinema. Television series are series. They’re sequential but they’re open-ended narratives. As long as people are interested in the story the story will keep going. Whereas films tend to be these compact units, you go in and you go out. *Psycho* was actually the first film that published its screening times in newspaper ads. Hitchcock specified in his contract that people would not be allowed in the theater after the film started. In the

old days—in my childhood, I remember—they didn't even print the screening times of movies in the newspaper ads. If you wanted to see the movie you'd just buy a ticket and you'd find your seat. And then you'd watch from wherever you came in. You'd watch the end and the trailers—which always trailed the film, that's why they called them trailers. And then you'd stay and watch the next round until it was, "Oh, that's where we came in, okay now we'll go." And Hitchcock changed that. It was a big publicity stunt: you cannot enter the theater after the movie starts.

KUSHNER: Because of the shocking nature—

SCHAMUS: Exactly. It was a hugely successful publicity stunt and for the business it was a great thing to do. So I think that, again, as the economics of movies really becomes the economics of DVD and video and broadband transmission, that the form will start to mutate, too. There's the movie and then there's the collector's edition DVD which has all the extras and then there's the new version of the movie. They become kind of patchworks of experience, and I think you're seeing that take place now. We don't make movies anymore, we make movies and DVDs. And you think about those things very much from day one.

KUSHNER: And that is part of it, this phenomenon of the package that includes outtakes and interviews and voiceover narration—

SCHAMUS: —Deleted scenes.

KUSHNER: Deleted scenes.

SCHAMUS: We just did the *Mean Girls* deleted scenes extravaganza with my daughters, which was great because, as you know, some of the greatest scenes you shoot and edit don't make it into the movie because they sometimes hurt the movie because they're so great. But then to see the great scenes is a wonderful experience.

KUSHNER: And I'm sure it will be interesting to see the effect it will have both on the decisions of

what to film when you're in principal photography and also decisions in editing. Because you can say, "It can be in the DVD."

SCHAMUS: That's right. By the way, as a studio executive it's become too hackneyed an argument when someone says, "I love this," and you say, "Well, you can put it in the director's cut."

ON WRITING: So that's a good thing.

SCHAMUS: Well, it's good for an executive because you have more ammo in your argument to cut the film down below three and a half hours, "Don't worry, of course people will see it." That kind of thing.

KUSHNER: It gives you an elasticity in a way that you have in theater. You can do a version of *Hamlet* and cut out any number of things.

SCHAMUS: You can do a 10-minute *Hamlet*.

KUSHNER: And it's still Shakespeare. It's still there. It gives you the possibility of playing it.



BIOGRAPHIES



TONY KUSHNER's plays include *A Bright Room Called Day*, *Angels In America –Parts One and Two*, *Slavs!*, *Homebody/Kabul* and *Caroline, or Change*, a musical with composer Jeanine Tesori. He has written adaptations of Corneille's *The Illusion*, S.Y. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, and Brecht's *The Good Person of Sezuan*, as well as English-language libretti for the operas *Brundibar* by Hans Krasa, and *The Comedy on the Bridge* by Bohuslav Martinu. His screen adaptation of *Angels in America*, directed by Mike Nichols, premiered in 2003 on HBO.

Recent books include: *Brundibar*, with illustrations by Maurice Sendak, the text for *The Art of Maurice Sendak, 1980 to the Present* and *Wrestling With Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict*, co-edited with Alisa Solomon.

Kushner is the recipient of numerous awards including the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, two Tony Awards for Best Play, two Obie Awards for Best Play, a Writers Guild of America Award for Best Long Form Adapted Teleplay, a Whiting Writer's fellowship, an Arts Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the PEN/Laura Pels Award for a Mid-Career Playwright; a Spirit of Justice Award from the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, and a Cultural Achievement Award from The National Foundation for Jewish Culture.



JAMES SCHAMUS is co-president of Focus Features, a motion picture production, financing and worldwide distribution company. Prior to the formation of Focus, he was the co-president of the independent film production company Good Machine, which he co-founded in 1991. Good Machine was recently honored with a 10-year retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Schamus has collaborated with Ang Lee on all of his feature films as a co-producer, producer or executive producer and often a screenwriter. His screenplay credits include: *The Hulk*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Ride With the Devil*, *The Ice Storm*, *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *the Wedding Banquet*. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* received an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay. *The Ice Storm* won the Best Screenplay prize at the 1997 Cannes International Film Festival and was nominated for Writers Guild and BAFTA awards.

He is an associate professor of film theory, history, and criticism at Columbia University's School of the Arts and currently serves on the board of directors of Creative Capital and the Foundation for Independent Video and Film. He was the 1997 Nuveen Fellow in the Humanities at the University of Chicago.

Schamus was honored with the NBC Screenwriter Tribute at the 2002 Nantucket Film Festival as well as with the Writers Guild of America, East's 2003 Richard B. Jablow Award for devoted service to the Guild.

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