

on writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

IN THIS ISSUE: PAUL HAGGIS, DOUGLAS McGRATH, JEREMY BROCK AND DOUG WRIGHT



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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Truman Capote once said, “Writing has laws of perspective, of light and shade just as painting does, or music. If you are born knowing them, fine. If not, learn them. Then rearrange the rules to suit yourself.”

The writers in this issue—Paul Haggis, Douglas McGrath, Jeremy Brock and Doug Wright—all talk about that combination of intuition integrated with structure in their writing processes. Paul Haggis and Douglas McGrath talk about writing and directing, Jeremy Brock and Doug Wright talk about film and theater.

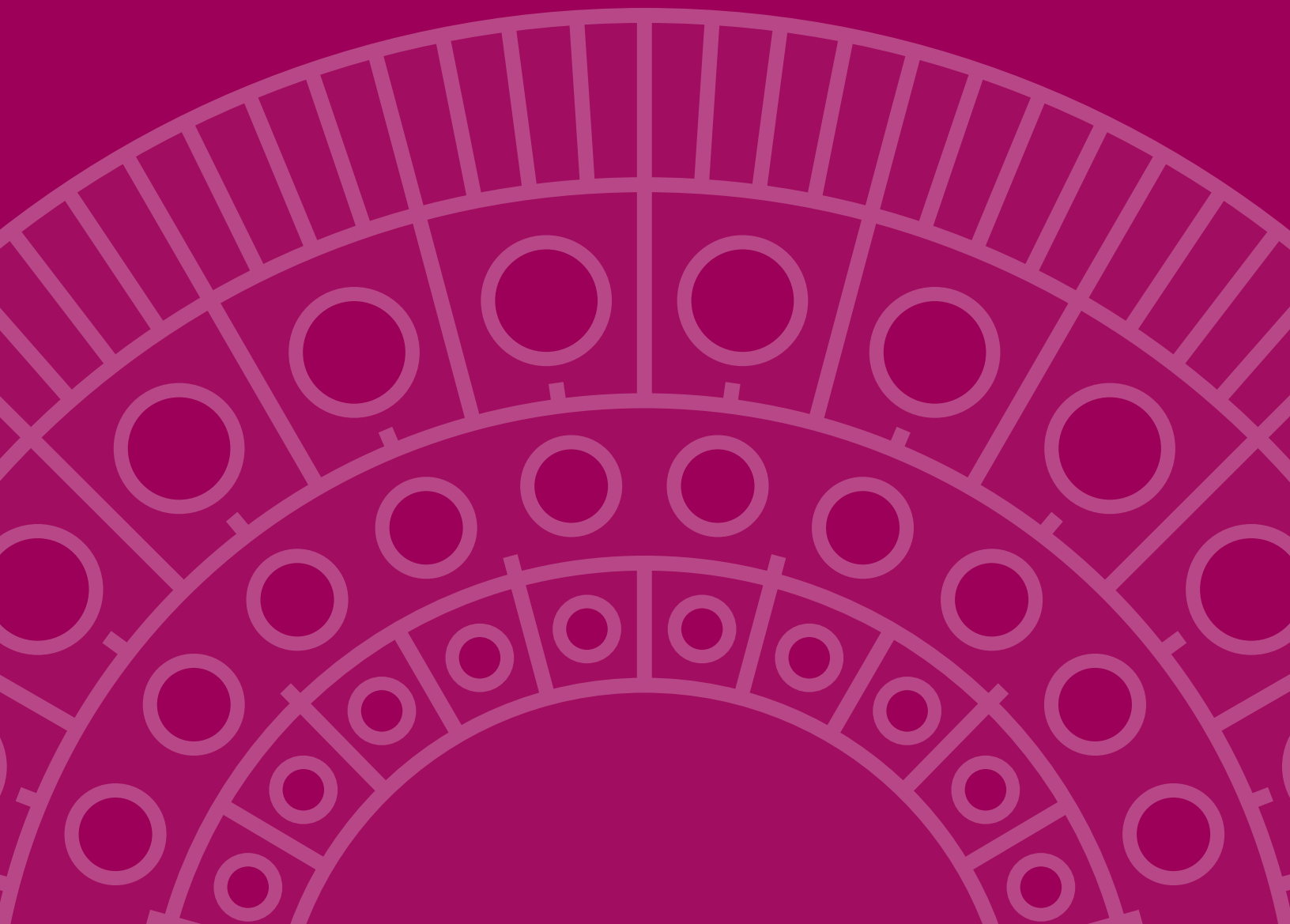
The Back Page features an *On Writing* interview Jules Feiffer did with Betty Comden in 2004. Ms. Comden died in November 2006. We’re publishing this interview as a tribute to her and her writing partner, Adolph Green.

— Arlene Hellerman

Front cover illustration by Herb Gardner

Paul Haggis
AND Douglas McGrath

NEW YORK CITY – AUGUST 6, 2006



ON WRITING: You guys have had an ongoing e-mail correspondence?

MCGRATH: We have. I wrote Paul after seeing *Crash* and because I got his address from Sandy Bullock—

HAGGIS: —Who was absolutely marvelous in *Infamous*. She was wonderful in *Crash*, but there were only brief moments. Here she really got to explore her character.

MCGRATH: And at the end, when she has to sum up so much of what's going on, she has the most beautiful simplicity and clarity to what she's doing. She doesn't move at all, she's very still. And I felt this very much in *Crash*, too, it's very simple what she does. She just gets right to the emotion that needs to be played. So you don't see someone who's making a big effort to change what we know of her. And yet she changes entirely what we know of her.

HAGGIS: I think it's much more difficult to play someone who's closer to who you are. In *Crash* her character's a complete bitch and it was antithetical to who Sandy Bullock is. And I think sometimes if you have a character that's so different from yourself, you don't take with you all the bells and tricks that you've learned along the way. It's like when I'm writing something that's very, very different from my experience, it's sometimes easier to leave those shortcuts behind.

ON WRITING: Can you expand on that?

HAGGIS: Doug, you were nodding, I was going to ask you about that.

MCGRATH: I was going to let you finish. Because *Crash* has a wide range of people in it and each one was completely persuasive to me. When you're writing a script with that many people and with people who are so different from each other, is it easier for you to write the people who are less like you? Or is it really easy to write whoever the Paul Haggis character is?

HAGGIS: That's very interesting. I don't know. Because I think each character is your character when you're inside it. And if you haven't judged the characters, so you've really been able to absorb those characters, then you think they're both right. And in an argument, well, Edward Albee does it best. There are a lot of people who do it best. You think of some of those fabulous arguments you hear and you think, oh, he's right, no, she's right. And that's what you hope to do. So I don't know if it's easier or not for me. But that was a script that just sort of—the story flew out of me and the script flew out of Bobby and me.

ON WRITING: Bobby....

HAGGIS: Bobby Moresco. I wrote the story and then we wrote the screenplay together.

MCGRATH: Yeah, but I'm curious. Did you always have it in mind as a story about this many—

HAGGIS: —Yeah, almost painfully formed. It was weird. It came between two o'clock in the morning when I woke up to start writing it, and 10 o'clock in the morning when I finished it. By the time it was done, I knew what the structure was. I thought I was writing a TV show.

MCGRATH: Where were you? Maybe I should try going there.

HAGGIS: The conceit was the characters kept bumping into each other, and I kept saying my rule—which developed I think around four o'clock in the morning—was that there are no secondary characters. Anybody who stepped into my story became a main character. So I just kept following those characters rather than trying to structure it in any way and by the end, I sort of had this plot. Now, Bobby and I did a lot of work to refine it and rework it between the first draft and second draft. But for example, *Million Dollar Baby* took me eight months, nine months of absolute blood-and-guts struggle. This took two weeks—I mean, the story took one night. Then I researched it for a year, reading everything I possibly could.

ON WRITING: About?

HAGGIS: About different peoples' experiences in America. And about different cultures and racial points of view, just the experience of different ethnicities mixing with other ethnicities. So I read tons and tons of nonfiction books. And then I couldn't sell the damn thing as a series. I took it everywhere, Sydney Pollack and I even took it to HBO and we couldn't sell it there. I just think it was a difficult thing to understand before it was on the page. So I called Bobby and said, "Do you want to write this thing with me?" And we got together and wrote it in two weeks, did a reading of it and did the next rough in two weeks. It was done.

MCGRATH: That's fantastic.

HAGGIS: It was. I've struggled with this last one, a year and a half, I'm still struggling with it.

MCGRATH: I can't get over that 2 a.m. to 10 a.m. thing.

HAGGIS: It's crazy. And it scared the life out of me because it broke all the rules and the structure that I knew.

ON WRITING: What rules of structure?

HAGGIS: This is Act I, this is Act II, this is Act III, this happens in Act I, this happens in Act II, Act III.... I got this thing done and I was looking at it and the biggest, most emotional scene happens dead in the middle of Act II. There was this rescue where Matt Dillon breaks into a car. The middle of Act II. That shouldn't be there, it should be someplace towards the end of Act III. And I knew that, but I read it and said, it can't be there but it doesn't work anyplace else, and so we just left it.

ON WRITING: Could you compensate for that by having the climax of another story in the right place?

HAGGIS: I guess so. I don't know. But it was scary to me because we didn't know. I'm sure in

the hands of a really good writer, they'd know what they were doing. We unfortunately just sort of muddled our way through and, because of that, just went with our gut. But when it was finished—and I don't know if you've ever had this experience—I didn't know if it was a screenplay and when I finished shooting the movie I didn't know if it was a movie or not. I figured if people paid the eight bucks, it was a movie and if they didn't, it wasn't.

MCGRATH: I'm curious because in the film, you did a really great transitional thing throughout. I wonder if that was always—

HAGGIS: —Always in the script.

ON WRITING: What was the transitional thing?

HAGGIS: Someone opens one door to walk out, someone else comes out of another door someplace else. Or as someone slams a door someone else wakes up across town. The idea is, everyone's connected. Actually, I had more than that in there and it just looked too fucking cutesy. So in the editing I went and took some out.

MCGRATH: And was it in there with the idea of giving it a sense of unity?

HAGGIS: Oh yeah, absolutely.

MCGRATH: It's very effective.

HAGGIS: I found writing an original screenplay much easier in the end than writing an adaptation. Now, you've done some really difficult adaptations. I mean, some mother-fucker of adaptations. Ones I certainly wouldn't approach. How did you find them?

MCGRATH: Well, in the case of *Nicholas Nickleby* it's a little easier than other Dickens novels in that, first of all, I felt, despite its length, there was a movie in it. But it's not Dickens' best novel by a long shot, and one of the reasons it's not the best is because it's an early novel and he hadn't figured

out how to organize it more tightly—or he didn't choose to—I mean, he was pretty in charge of his gifts. But he had a lot of stories that didn't connect at all. Early in the story, when Nicholas is on his way to Dotheboy's Hall with Squeers, he and Squeers stop at an inn overnight and there's a man that they talk to in the bar and the man tells them a story.

HAGGIS: Oh, I remember, yes.

MCGRATH: It goes on for about 20 pages in the book. You think, I can't wait to see how this is going to apply—

HAGGIS: —And it just doesn't.

MCGRATH: The guy never shows up again. It's just padding. Not padding—I'd be so lucky to write padding like that—but it's gone, that's it. So there's no sense that everything needs to apply to everything else. And while I loved the other stories, I felt that if I followed Nicholas' story, which is to say the story of him and his mother and his sister making their way in the world, I would get all my favorite things from the novel out of it. I always make a very detailed outline of the novel. I write at the top of every page what happens and I transcribe that to an outline. Then I look at it. I try to look at it away from the magic of the prose, because if you don't, then you want to just keep everything.

HAGGIS: Yes, I know, you're dead.

MCGRATH: And you just think, what holds up on its own? But my first draft for myself—

HAGGIS: Was it 300 pages?

MCGRATH: No, it was only 170. During the printing process I was thinking, this is going to be so wonderful, I've managed to shrink this great novel down to a manageable size. And then I started reading it and it wasn't very wonderful. It was way too long still. But I find I only really want to adapt something that I have a sense is going to work as

a piece of drama. With both *Emma* and *Nicholas*, I felt that. But on *Infamous*, it was interesting because although it's technically based on George Plimpton's book—

HAGGIS: —It seems you took a freer hand with it.

MCGRATH: Yeah. Before we even paid money to option his book, I'd already had the idea of what I wanted to do. I knew the first part would be Capote in New York and then going to Kansas. I knew what everything would be. I almost never have an easy time writing, but the beginning of that script up till the arrival of Perry Smith was just like knocking over dominoes. It was just the easiest thing in the world for me because I knew the New York world, I grew up in Texas so I knew what the Kansas people would be thinking when he came from New York and I knew what he'd be thinking of the Kansas people.

HAGGIS: It's interesting, because the experience of watching it is effortless. What happens is, it sets you up and—

MCGRATH: Well, that's what the first scene's about, too. You start with champagne glasses and caviar being scooped into a potato. And you think, gosh, I want to be here. And then something goes wrong.

ON WRITING: With the singer, who's played by Gwyneth Paltrow.

MCGRATH: It's my way of saying, okay, pay attention, everything's not as perfect as it looks.

HAGGIS: And I love the fact that her character told us what the entire story was.

MCGRATH: That scene is the movie in miniature; it's about this glamorous, rich person who seems to have the world as her oyster. Everything's going her way and then something pierces her: she's singing a song about love and it renders her helpless, just as Truman will also be rendered helpless.

HAGGIS: How did you come up with the conceit of putting her at the beginning?

MCGRATH: It's funny, I had written the script starting with the scene where Truman's in his apartment in Brooklyn, he's in bed writing and then he reads the newspaper and gets the idea. And it ended, as you know, with him back in his apartment, a new apartment now very high and glamorous, same yellow pad, but unable to go on. So that was my structure of the yellow pad to the yellow pad. But as I kept reading I thought, to start the movie that way wasn't exciting enough and I really wanted to place the audience in his world. It was very important to me to explain the context out of which he came so that we know who that person is that arrives in Kansas. It's not just a writer from New York, not just a gay writer from New York, it's a gay writer from the very top of New York society that is coming to Kansas. And the whole story is about what he's giving up to go there and, when he comes back, what he's lost to have been there. And how he can't come back to that world. Many years ago I had gone to see Barbara Cook at the Carlyle. And in the middle of a song, she stopped and I thought, wow, this is a really good dramatic pause she's taking. Then I thought, oh, she's not taking a dramatic pause, she's stopped singing. Her piano player had stopped, and at the Carlyle—I don't know how many tables it is but it's not very many—so the whole room is kind of nervous and then she turns to the piano player and says, "Let's start again." She starts again, gets to the same place and stops. Now the second time she stops, everyone in the room is so nervous, all you can hear is the ice tinkling in the glasses. It seems so personal and you're slightly uncomfortable. And she says finally, very quietly, "I'm sorry, this has been a hard year for me, I lost a friend." I'm telling you, at this point you could have heard a sock drop six blocks away. "I lost a friend and this song reminds me of him." And she said, "I'm going to try it one more time. If I can't get through it, we're not doing the song." So the whole room is leaning forward like in a boxing match. She goes through the song, she gets to the part and she goes through it. And

the sense of accomplishment and joy and ecstasy in the room was so great that I've never forgotten it. And I thought, what if someone were singing a song, a song they've sung a thousand times, and they actually listened to it as if they weren't just singing it but as if they were saying it. And then it's about someone breaking your heart maybe for being unfaithful, and maybe that person has just been unfaithful. And then you have to sing it and you just go there and then can't come back. So I thought it was a good way to bring his whole world into a tiny nutshell because, first of all, that's what happens to him in the movie. He goes there, he becomes emotionally pierced in a way and is never able to come back from it. And unlike the singer, he can't recover. He puts on a good show as if he's recovering, but he never recovers.

HAGGIS: I thought that was really wonderful—and it is odd for a writer-director to capture so much without dialogue. It's just inference. You do it certainly with Truman. There's so much there unspoken. I love scripts when the author, the screenwriter, allows us to be intelligent. I could see a pure director, if there is such a beast—certainly not in Hollywood, nothing is pure—capture something without words, but for a writer-director to really trust the fact that by *not* saying it, you are saying it more effectively is, I think, a rare gift.

MCGRATH: I thought it happened a lot in *Crash*, where you would see someone in a situation—like Matt Dillon, when you see him with his father and you see how degrading or ungrateful the father is for his help, it explains so much about who that character is without anyone explaining it.

HAGGIS: I think that's where we fall short a lot, when we try to explain our characters—and we do it all the time as writers, I know I do it all the time. If we just trust the characters and trust that through their actions they will betray who they are, it is the simplest thing and the Greeks have been telling us that for how many thousands of years. But we can't seem to trust it and when we do, it always pays off.

ON WRITING: Maybe a director can do that because he or she is constantly dealing with the kinds of nuances that come into a movie once it becomes three dimensional. Whereas writers are dealing with it in their heads and on the page.

HAGGIS: Well, I think there are two kinds of writers. I could be wrong. I think there are writers who have the characters play out the scene in front of them and they just struggle to catch up with what the characters are saying. And then there's the kind of writer who sits and creates and isn't really truly visualizing what's going on. But it's more of an intellectual pursuit.

MCGRATH: Can I just say that I thought what you said before was so right, which is that the truest writing is when you as a writer become that character in the scene. It's one of the things I've always felt is so essential in writing. Dickens is a perfect example of this, which is that he writes villains and heroes with—you still hate the villain and yet, he doesn't make the villain illogical.

HAGGIS: He makes a compelling case for the villain.

MCGRATH: He fully puts himself in there because in life, anyone we think of as a villain, I'm guessing, doesn't think of himself as a villain. That guy thinks hey, I want to conquer Poland, I think that's the right plan. He believes it's right. If you're writing that person, you have to try and understand where he comes from because otherwise, it's just paper figures so that there's no sustainable—

HAGGIS: I think you're probably right, I don't think there are two kinds of writers. I think what I said is bullshit. I think that there are two kinds of

writing experiences. We both go through the times where we have to slog through and the characters aren't talking to us and it is an intellectual pursuit. And then there's the experience of when the characters are talking to you and are fully formed and you've been good enough not to judge them so that they speak to you. And that's much more a visual experience so that's an easier thing for a writer to direct because you've already seen it.

MCGRATH: But there's another problem—well, there are many problems—and one of them is, for a writer, you write a screenplay and you sell it as a physical object, which is to say something on paper that someone reads on paper. And most of the people who read the script on paper are not particularly gifted at inference or nuance. And especially if that writer isn't going to direct the script—and I actually feel all writers should direct their scripts. For me, to not direct your script, if you can make that happen, is an abdication of your responsibility to your writing.

ON WRITING: Wow.

MCGRATH: Well, I do think that. I do, because I think people consider them as entirely separate talents and they're not.

HAGGIS: I think that a filmmaker's a filmmaker's a filmmaker.

ON WRITING: I can think of some terrific screenwriters who are not directors. I would question whether you really think that all writers can direct.

MCGRATH: No, I didn't say that. I think all writers *should* direct.

HAGGIS: But they can't because they'd make fucking awful directors.

MCGRATH: I don't know how you would write it. I mean, I couldn't live my life writing it and then letting it go.

HAGGIS: It's incredibly painful. Even when you hand it over to someone who's incredibly talented. It's always going to be a different point of view. It can't possibly be your point of view because you're giving it to someone else.

ON WRITING: Could it be better?

HAGGIS: Yes, it can be much better. It'll still be painful.

MCGRATH: Yeah.

HAGGIS: And I don't think anyone understands that. Because you look and it'll be fabulous, but that first time, that first viewing is always painful.

ON WRITING: Paul, you wrote and directed *Crash*, but *Million Dollar Baby*—

HAGGIS: I wrote *Million Dollar Baby* and *Crash* both on spec in 2000, 2001.

MCGRATH: You wrote them both in the same year?

HAGGIS: Well, two years. I was leaving a television show. I optioned the short stories for *Million Dollar Baby* from a book, *Rope Burns*, a wonderful collection of short stories, and I was set to direct it. We had attached Hilary [Swank] and Morgan Freeman. Anyway, so I was two weeks into shooting *Crash* and my producing partner, Al Ruddy,

asked me if he could send *Million Dollar Baby* to Clint [Eastwood]. I said, "Of course you can send it to Clint." And Al said, "He's going to want to direct." And I said, "Well, let's cross that creek when we come to it." Or bridge. I often speak in clichés.

MCGRATH: That's quite comforting.

HAGGIS: Thank you. So we sent it to him, he read it immediately and said, "I'd like to do it, can I direct?" My first reaction is no, let him get his own fucking script. And then hold it, hold it, hold it he's Clint Eastwood, he'll do a brilliant job. And so I said of course he can do it. It wasn't an easy decision, but it was the right one. And it was very difficult for me to watch the early cut of that. Not that it changed and not that it should have changed. It didn't have to do with brilliant, it was brilliant, but it wasn't exactly the way I'd envisioned it. It was better in many ways than I envisioned it. I thought Clint's eye and the way he captured those characters was wonderful. But it's startling to go from something you've only seen in your head to seeing something on the screen and you're saying, "No, I didn't see it from there. I saw it from over *there*." It took me three times to see *Million Dollar Baby*. However, it took me probably 40, 45 times and two years of seeing *Crash* to think it was any good.

MCGRATH: When did you change your mind?

HAGGIS: About two weeks ago.

ON WRITING: Why?

HAGGIS: I got to see it at this little festival in Italy, in Ischia, it's on an island near Capri, it's fabulous.

And they screened it on a screen—it must have been a hundred feet tall, on a cliff over the ocean. We all sat out and watched it in the open air. The sound quality bouncing off the water was amazing. And for some reason it was so freeing seeing it that way that I could actually watch the film, which I'd never be able to do up to this point. And I quite enjoyed it.

MCGRATH: Did you also get the benefit of not having seen it for a long time?

HAGGIS: I hadn't seen it in about a year.

MCGRATH: That must make a difference.

ON WRITING: Even if you direct it, it's still not what it is in your head.

HAGGIS: But it's closer, it's much closer. I think the problem is you think it *is* what was in your head, you just failed to execute it well.

MCGRATH: Yeah, because you're aiming towards what's in your head the whole time. Sometimes you'll have a director of photography or an actor or someone with an idea that takes it away from what your original idea was, and often it's so much better. And you think, thank God we didn't go with my idea.

HAGGIS: Yeah, often that was the case with me.

MCGRATH: I wish I could think of a better example than the one I'm going to give you, but in *Emma*, there's a scene where Emma and Harriet are going into town early in the movie and they spot Miss Bates, who is the garrulous spinster. When they see her, they want to avoid her, they don't like her because she'll tell them about the letter she just got and bore them senseless. So just as she's coming near, they pop open their parasols and hide behind them as they walk by. And it just gives the scene a little something. Well, in the script they didn't have parasols. We only had parasols because on the day we shot the scene there was a light rain and so Ruth, my costumer, said, well, they can have these. And then we thought oh, we

can use those. And once we did it, I thought, what would the scene have been without those? They would have just turned away and it wouldn't have been very interesting at all.

HAGGIS: Oh, isn't that funny.

MCGRATH: So sometimes it does get better. But then you can appreciate it because you were there. Whereas if Clint Eastwood had done that, you would have thought—

HAGGIS: —What are the parasols, the parasols ruined the shot. You weren't a part of the process. Even if the writer is invited on the set, you aren't really a part of the process.

ON WRITING: Paul, how did you get involved with *Flags of Our Fathers*? You were brought into it by Clint Eastwood....

HAGGIS: In *Flags of Our Fathers*, my meeting with Clint Eastwood and [Steven] Spielberg went something like this: Steven turns to me and says, "So what did you think?" And I said, "It's a wonderful book. I think I've got a 10 percent chance of making it work." And he says, "Oh, okay." So we talked for an hour and a half and at the end of that he turns to me and says, "So what do you think now?" And I said, "I think I've got an 11 percent chance." So we leave and Clint drives me back to the office and I said, "Clint, I don't know what I'm doing here. I don't know how to do this book, I don't know anything about this world, I don't even know how to attack it, I wouldn't know even where to start. But if you really, really, really, really, really want me to do it, I will." And he says, "Okay." And oddly, that's why people love Clint Eastwood, he just trusts them. There are things that you think, I can't do that as an actor, I can't do that as a writer, he just trusts you to do it. And so I went away and I tortured myself and I brought in Bobby Moresco and my daughter Alisa to help me. We just sat around, we wrote in all the cards and put them up on the walls and finally they had to leave and I was stuck with all of these cards and I started peeling things away.

MCGRATH: What were your cards, scenes?

HAGGIS: Well, scenes and moments and things that had happened. It's a huge book. It's gigantic. It's just very literal in its telling, wonderful in its telling, but very literal. And then finally I figured out how to tell the story in three separate, contiguous timelines. It was nothing miraculous, but I tell the entire story at the same time: the events in the present, the events of the war and the events after the war. I cut back and forth only at emotional moments and link everything emotionally. I wrote it without ever handing in an outline, without ever telling them what I was doing; I just wrote the script, handed it to Clint, he handed it to Steven, we had a half-hour meeting, Clint gave me no notes and Steven gave me two. I did the rewrite in two hours and that was it, they shot it.

MCGRATH: I have another question for Paul. Dare I raise the word theme? Some people are very plot minded and some are very theme or character minded, but you seem very strong on both. When does the theme come in to the story? Is it always at the beginning?

HAGGIS: When it's at the beginning, I'm really worried. I was so worried with *Crash* because the theme was there, not from the beginning, but fairly soon afterwards. The themes of intolerance, of connectivity, alienation—all that was there pretty early and that really worried me. I like it much better when I discover the theme afterwards, it's there in the back of my mind and I can figure out what this damn movie's about and finally it sort of evolves. I'm much more comfortable with that. It's tough because the minute you know what the theme is, God, you write the thing in every scene. And while that's exactly what you should do, you shouldn't know you're doing it.

MCGRATH: It just comes out.

HAGGIS: Yes. And so it was very difficult for that reason. *Crash* was tough because I hate saying what you mean. That's the worst sin and I kept feeling that's what I was doing. That's why it was

very difficult for me to watch *Crash*, I often think I'm saying what I mean.

MCGRATH: That's interesting, but *Crash* is so complex it doesn't feel like a movie in which you're constantly being told what the theme is.

HAGGIS: I knocked myself over the head for that. How do you deal with that?

MCGRATH: I'm always drawn to the story first. Because I can't think in themes. With *Infamous* the first part was easy because it plays like a light comedy. And then it came to a screeching halt when Perry Smith came into the story because first of all, I realized I'm about an hour into the movie and pretty much the rest of it is going to be with Truman and Perry Smith in a jail cell. And I thought, how's that going to work? And also, Perry Smith is the character in the story who I knew the least about at the beginning. Same as Truman did. And I realized I was in Truman's position in that I had to learn everything about him before I could write it. There's not much in the public record. There are some clues, though. We knew he was very, very hesitant to talk to Truman and yet he would always let him in to tell him he didn't want to talk to him. So I found that my job at first was kind of like a psychiatrist or in blunter terms, a detective, which is that I had a series of clues from his life and I had to make emotional sense of them which would then help me make dramatic sense of them. But it took me a long time to work those steps out.

HAGGIS: How long did it take you?

MCGRATH: Weeks and weeks. I don't remember how many weeks because I just remember every day—

HAGGIS: —It's painful.

MCGRATH: And that is so painful. But I will say this, once I understood him, then it wasn't hard for me to write Perry Smith at all. He's the person on the surface the least like me in the story. And

yet always when you understand people—it’s practically the message of your film, when you understand what’s beyond the surface of people, that’s what connects everyone anyway because we all know the feeling of being unloved by a parent or being in love with someone who doesn’t love us back. So whether you’re part-Indian or whether you’re Persian being mistaken for Arab, whether you’re whatever, underneath, everyone knows what that is. So I had to just get underneath to understand them.

HAGGIS: That’s just so beautiful in the film when Perry Smith says to Truman, “We really connected, didn’t we?”

MCGRATH: I think it’s the saddest line in the movie. And the way Daniel Craig says it is so hopeful. His eyes—having seen it several thousand times—it always gets me when he says it because he says that like it’s possible we couldn’t have, tell me we did.

HAGGIS: And we connected now at this moment in our life when—

MCGRATH: —In this impossible place.

HAGGIS: I think the Harper Lee stuff is just heart-breaking, she’s the emotional backbone of the piece and that’s a difficult thing to do because, whether it’s in voiceover or in someone talking about the characters, it often distances you from the characters. In that case, it didn’t. It really made you understand the characters and made you weep for them. And hers especially. I don’t know why.

MCGRATH: I know. I don’t know why, either. I’m not really afraid of voiceover. I know a lot of people loathe it. I’ve used it a couple of times and I actually find it quite comforting. I love the way you start your movie with it. In *Crash*, it’s black and then—

HAGGIS: —Yeah, and then it turns into somebody just talking. But the trick I found in voiceover is to always find an emotional logic for it. In *Million Dollar Baby* I didn’t know what I had until

I created the letters and I knew that the whole voiceover was the letter to the daughter. So it gives you one more level of discovery when you find out he’s writing that letter at the end to at least let the daughter know who her father was after he’s gone. In *Flags of Our Fathers* I knew I needed narration because there was so much stuff I had to tell. But I decided to only have a narrator tell what he knew and witnessed firsthand. It was too easy to have the fellow who’s writing the book narrate it, but he wouldn’t have witnessed any of it so he wouldn’t have any emotional connection. So I had seven or eight narrators throughout the structure. I think there are fewer now in the initial cut of the film.

MCGRATH: It’s funny, in *Nicholas* I thought I had to have a narrator because there was too much story. And I realized—I don’t remember at what point—it should be Crummles narrating because, first of all it explains the theatricality of everything if a person from the theater is narrating. And then when you find out at the end he’s been doing it as part of a toast, you think, oh, it’s not expository narration separate from the story, it’s part of the story. With *Infamous*, the idea of the characters talking to camera came from the Plimpton book, which is an oral history. I felt early on I wanted people to talk to the audience. And it’s very helpful when you have to get some background information and you never want to do that thing where the two characters are saying, “Remember that time you fell off your bike and Dad said ‘Don’t worry, you can get up....’” This way they can just give it to you and move on. And it’s quite helpful in terms of pace, too.

HAGGIS: Absolutely. And since you got to see many of those characters interacting with Truman, you actually cared about them. It brought something to those scenes because sometimes they’re betraying truths, it’s lovely.

MCGRATH: I never thought of it the way you’re saying, which is because I’m giving them that time, it helps to feel as though we know them when they’re in a scene.

ON WRITING: You also carried through, in terms of the testimonials, the documentary technique of having different characters complete a story in the telling. There were certain instances where you'd start with a testimonial, cut to Truman saying something, then cut to Truman saying something to someone else—

HAGGIS: Yeah, the structure was very interesting that way I thought. It's very clever.

MCGRATH: At the beginning I wanted to do it so that he gets the idea, then we have the testimonial to give us what I thought was the essential information we needed about him, and then he goes to lunch. And I wanted that lunch to be the domino that starts everything going: he starts telling the story at La Côte Basque, continues it at William Shawn's office at *The New Yorker*, then at El Morocco and on to P.J. Clarke's. I wanted it to feel like once that story starts he had a fever about it and never stopped talking about it, essentially, until he ends up in Kansas.

HAGGIS: You had a sequence like that which was wonderful about how he crafts a sentence. He tries it on this person, he tries it on that person, and you see the various versions and then the checkmark. Wonderful.

ON WRITING: Paul, you use a similar voiceover technique in *The Black Donnellys*, the new TV show you're doing. I thought it was such an ingenious way to do exposition. You have this character, "Joey Ice Cream," introducing each of these brothers.

HAGGIS: Yeah. In that case, it's a compulsive liar who's narrating it so your reality begins to change when he's caught in a lie.

ON WRITING: But also, it was a wonderful way to meet these characters in a pilot rather than have one Donnelly go up to the other Donnelly saying, "Hi, brother."

HAGGIS: People were worried at the beginning that it was going to distance us from the characters

because sometimes narration does that. And I can't say that it didn't. I don't know. My television work—I don't do very good television, I've made it a great career of failing upwards. Most successful television starts off with a bang and then there's a big twist and there's another emotional thing and there's a big plot thing and by three minutes in, you're sweating. My stuff is a very slow burn so that you sort of start to get excited 42 minutes into a 43-minute piece.

MCGRATH: That's not true of *Crash*. I don't think that's true of *Million Dollar Baby*, either.

HAGGIS: No, they weren't television though, they were movies.

MCGRATH: Oh, that's the technique for TV, I see.

HAGGIS: And that one is a very slow build. It's not until 20 minutes in that you start to really become involved. And I'm not sure if that's because of the narration. I don't think it is. I wanted to tell it slowly, just let the story unfold.

ON WRITING: Paul, I want to ask about your television work. You started out as a writer on—

HAGGIS: —*Scooby-Doo*. I was doing cartoons before I did sitcoms. My kids were heartbroken when I left cartoons. I did it for one year.

ON WRITING: And then you did *One Day at a Time*?

HAGGIS: Yeah. *Facts of Life*, *Diff'rent Strokes*....

ON WRITING: Was it a difficult transition then to go from screenplay to the half-hour format?

HAGGIS: No, because I wasn't doing well at screen psychological suspense thrillers. In my early 20s, I was writing everything I possibly could. I just happened to find somebody who had an in with Norman Lear and we were able to get on every bad show he ever did. And were grateful for it. I wasn't very good at screenplays or at sitcoms. I wasn't

very good at anything. I earned a very good living being a very bad writer for many, many years.

MCGRATH: When do you think you became good?

HAGGIS: After *thirtysomething*. Because Marshall [Herskovitz] and Ed [Zwick] who were running *thirtysomething* asked me some important questions. They asked me what the script was about and I said well, it's about this funny line and this thing and that business. "Where does it come from within you and your experience?" I said, "It's supposed to do that?" I had no idea. I'd been earning a living 10 years as a professional writer, I had no idea.

MCGRATH: I've found a similar thing at the Sundance Lab. I don't know if you've ever been an advisor there—

HAGGIS: No.

MCGRATH: Well, I've frequently done it, and one of the things that I'm always astounded by—except I don't know why I keep being astounded by it because it keeps happening—is that when we're talking with the fellows, the students, whatever, I say, "You don't always have to know the minute you start, but you have to know at some point what your movie's about." And I'm amazed at how many people can't answer the question apart from "It's about a guy who goes...." And you say, "No, no, no. What is your movie about? Why was it important that you write that movie?"

HAGGIS: Why is it important to you. Exactly. And what's the question that you have that can't be answered, a question that's gnawing at you, that you can't answer for yourself. That's usually what I try and start with, something that's just an impossible question. With *Million Dollar Baby*, I'd lived through that situation a couple of times with those life-and-death circumstances and made those decisions and knew they were impossible. I knew that Clint Eastwood's character, the Frankie character's position was untenable and that Maggie's position was untenable, and that

they were both right and there was no way to be right in the situation ultimately. How do you kill something you love? And how do you live knowing it can no longer be what you want? And since I couldn't answer that question, I knew I wanted to write that.

ON WRITING: And you have that with everything?

HAGGIS: I try, yeah, to have something, some question that I can't answer.

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BIOGRAPHIES



PAUL HAGGIS co-wrote and directed *Crash*, which won Academy Awards both for Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay in addition to the Writers Guild Award, the BAFTA Award and the Critics' Choice Award for Best Original Screenplay.

His other screenplays include *Million Dollar Baby*, *Casino Royale*, *Flags of Our Fathers* and the story for *Letters from Iwo Jima*.

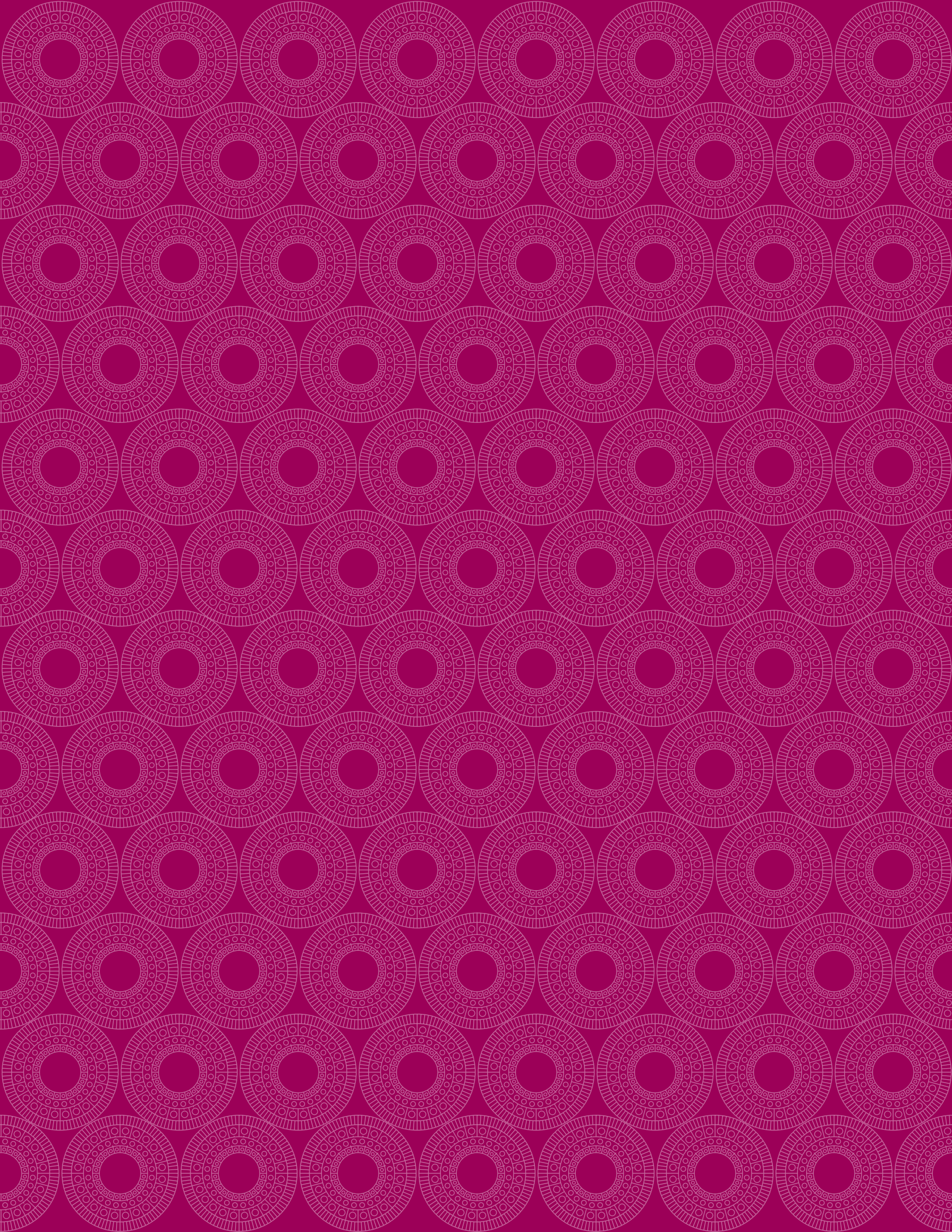
Haggis has written for and created a number of television shows, his favorite being the CBS drama series *EZ Street*. His latest drama series, *The Black Donnellys*, premiered on NBC in February 2007.

He is the recipient of many awards, including two Emmys, the Humanitas Prize, TV Critics Association Program of the Year Award, Viewers For Quality Television Founders Award, Banff TV Award, Columbia Mystery Writers Award, six Geminis, two Houston Worldfest Gold Awards, the Prism Award, the EMA Award, Genesis Award, Ethel Levitt Memorial Award for Humanitarian Service, the Hollywood Award for Breakthrough Director and the WGAw's Valentine Davies Award.

Haggis is currently directing his screenplay *In the Valley of Elah*.

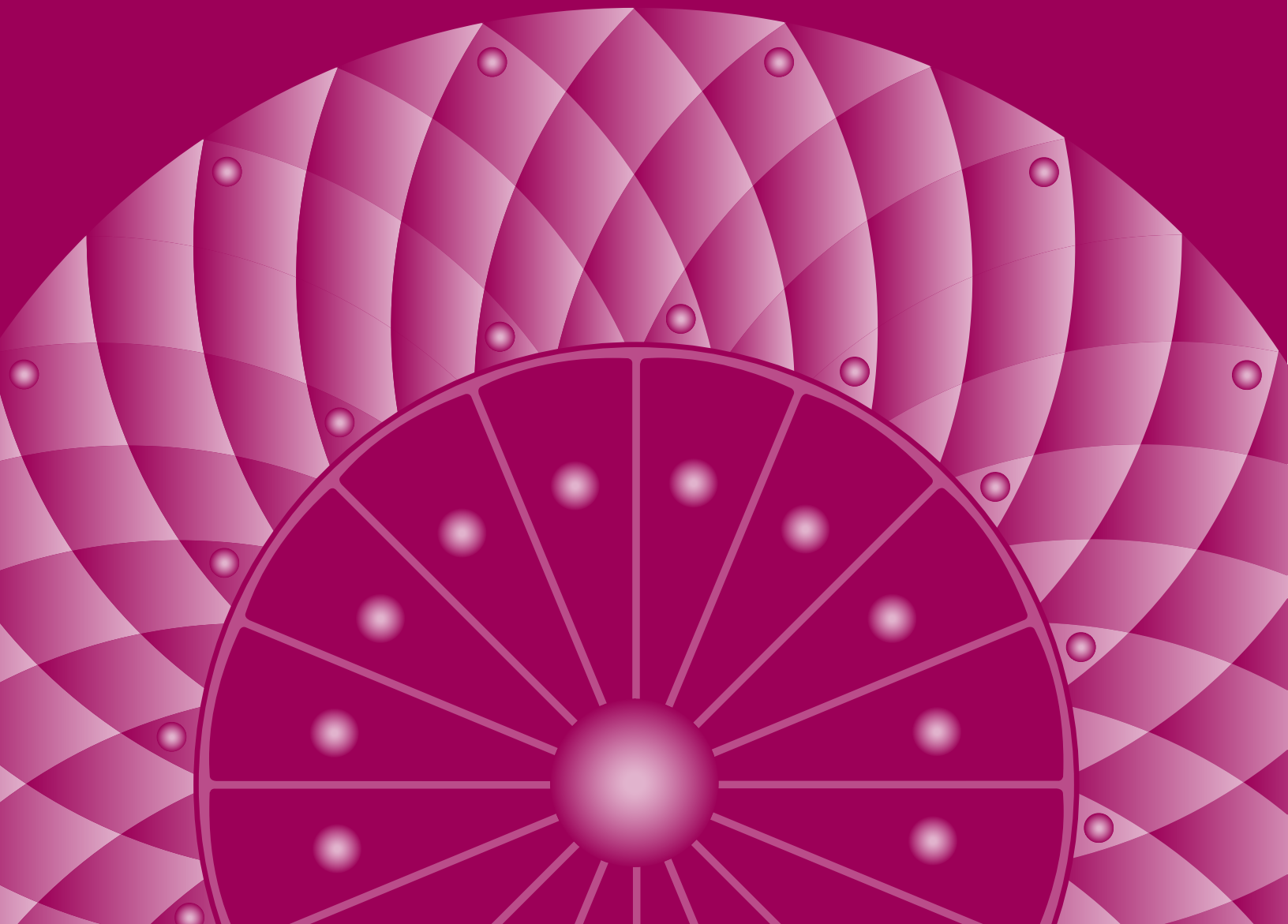


DOUGLAS MCGRATH began his career at *Saturday Night Live* in what was incontestably the worst year in the show's history (1980). Since then, he has written and directed *Emma*, *Company Man*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Infamous*. He also co-wrote *Bullets Over Broadway* with Woody Allen, for which they were nominated for an Academy Award.



Jeremy Brock
AND
Doug Wright

LONDON, PALM SPRINGS, NEW YORK CITY — DECEMBER 8, 2006



ON WRITING: I think we should start by explaining that this is a transatlantic, transcontinental phone conversation: Jeremy's in London, I'm in New York and Doug is in Palm Springs working on a project.

BROCK: It's so impressive.

WRIGHT: Very impressive.

BROCK: Now we have to deliver our bon mots.

WRIGHT: You know, I've written some down. Hold the phone.

BROCK: Well, this is the advantage of the phone, isn't it?

ON WRITING: We should also explain that you have a producer in common.

BROCK: We do. We know each other through a wonderful producer named Julia Chasman, who has produced both of our movies.

WRIGHT: Exactly. Julia was instrumental in both *Quills* and *Driving Lessons*.

ON WRITING: *Quills* is the film Doug wrote based upon his play, and *Driving Lessons* is the movie that Jeremy wrote and directed.

BROCK: And one of the things that Julia does is she has an antenna for finding writers and bringing them into her formidable orbit. It would be fair to describe it as formidable, would it not, Doug?

WRIGHT: I think so. She's a real force.

BROCK: And she is a great nurturer of writers.

ON WRITING: You both came to writing screenplays from other mediums. Doug, you were a playwright and Jeremy, you began more in British television. So what were those transitions like?

BROCK: Doug, do you want to start?

WRIGHT: I grew up primarily in the theater and most of my writing has been stage plays. I think playwriting and screenwriting are markedly different crafts. They might seem like cousins, but in truth they're as disparate as, say, being a tax attorney versus a nuclear physicist.

BROCK: I agree with you.

WRIGHT: They're really different.

ON WRITING: Why?

WRIGHT: The way I always find perspective is just looking at their origins. The theater began when the Greeks started chanting their epic poetry; it's always been linked to the word, it's always been language-based. Film was born when Thomas Alva Edison sped up a bunch of stills. And some people would suggest that film had reached a pretty sophisticated place even before they introduced sound, before there was even dialogue. As a writer, I always find that very humbling. It tends to put my work in perspective. Where the crafts are united, I think, is in the act of storytelling, because both require a compelling sense of narrative. But the way that narrative gets expressed is really about as different as a story as it's told in a symphony and a story as it's told in a painting.

BROCK: And I would add that, for me, making the transition from television into film was very much a move away from dialogue-driven drama and towards something that was much more image driven—the common currency being narrative, as Doug says. And certainly, the more experience I've had working in movies, the less dialogue I write. I don't know about you, Doug—

WRIGHT: I think it's true. I remember when I was working on *Quills* years ago, every night the director, Philip Kaufman, would send me home to cut more dialogue. And I'd sit there through tears with red pen in hand muttering to myself, "There are no great movies based on George Bernard Shaw plays. There are no great movies based on...." and just cut, cut, cut. Talk can curdle onscreen, action has a

funny way of speaking louder. I also feel—and this could be my ego speaking—that when I’m a playwright, I’m the most powerful person in the room. I’m the king, and everyone’s task is to serve my vision as it’s expressed in my script. But making a movie—and admittedly I’ve worked primarily on adaptations and not original material—I feel much less like a king and more like a general in a broadly fought campaign.

BROCK: And it can get just as bloody.

WRIGHT: Your role is different, too. It’s not about realizing your singular vision. It’s about contributing to a collective vision that will create, ultimately, an end product which, if it’s good, will *seem* to be the expression of a singular vision.

BROCK: But that’s a chimera. The truth is that it’s actually a collective, industrial effort.

WRIGHT: Yes.

BROCK: And it can appear at its best to be the vision of one or two minds. But Doug is right that in fact it’s a military campaign. And to some extent, just to carry that analogy into light industry, I’ve found that the experience of directing even a small movie to be like gathering a group of people together for a short period of time and saying we’re *Driving Lessons, Inc.* It felt like I was involved with a number of departments and my job was to articulate as clearly as I could what it was that I meant by those lines in that document. There wasn’t a sense, as I think Doug is describing it, of people sitting in a room rehearsing a vision.

ON WRITING: But isn’t it ultimately your vision if you’re the writer-director?

BROCK: The end product, yes. And I must say that editing brings you back closer to the art and the craft of it. That’s certainly true. In post-production, you are reminded that there is an idea at the root of the thing. But the production process is a different kind of collaboration, I think.

WRIGHT: I think what you’re saying is important. Editing really is deeply analogous to writing, and it’s in the editing room that most films are truly “written,” to some degree.

BROCK: Or rewritten.

WRIGHT: It’s certainly the last critical step. And Jeremy was both a writer and a director on *Driving Lessons*, but as someone who’s solely worked as a writer, one of the most painful lessons you learn, I think, is abdication.

BROCK: Yes.

WRIGHT: You turn over as much high-quality raw clay as you can to the director and to the studio, but with the profound awareness that you ain’t the potter.

BROCK: And stepping away from directing and back into screenwriting, as I’ve done now, I’m acutely aware of that. Doug’s right, you hand in your first draft—as I have done just recently—and I don’t know why this is, but in order to do your best work you have to kid yourself every time that everybody is going to say it’s perfect. Because if you don’t, you can’t sit there and do it.

WRIGHT: Absolutely.

BROCK: And so the disappointment is always at the same level when you realize that, hey, actually, there’s an enormous amount still to do and it’s

going to be remodeled in front of you. That's just the way it is. And I guess, as a screenwriter, you live with that disjunction between your extreme hope and the reality of that first crash into development.

WRIGHT: It's funny, when you talk about the editing process, I've had the great privilege of being on set and in the editing room for two films that I worked on.

ON WRITING: Which films?

WRIGHT: *Quills*, of course—and I'd rather not mention the second film by name since I wasn't accorded WGA credit and I wouldn't want to offend the original writer. Suffice it to say it was a sumptuous costume drama reminiscent of William Wyler with a sterling international cast. But in both instances, when I was on set I always felt daunted by the sheer scale of it, all the machinery: the director commandeering the camera crew, the assistant director barking at extras, the costumer, the actors, the gaffers, the grips—all working with synchronicity to create the requisite image. But in the editing room, I didn't feel the least bit intimidated. That's where I found I really had to sit on my hands and keep my mouth shut, because it felt like writing—

BROCK: —It felt familiar.

WRIGHT: —And I felt like I had the utter authority to say, “No, switch those scenes,” or, “Reverse that cut.” I had no shyness whatsoever about speaking up. Now, luckily I was working with two directors who actually solicited my opinion so I didn't have to keep quiet the whole time. But I would have found it maddening.

ON WRITING: Doug, you're working on a script with a director who brought you out to California to work with him, is he telling you what his thought process is and you're sort of realizing it?

WRIGHT: Somewhat. What's happening in beautiful Palm Springs right now is really idiosyncratic

but a lot of fun. I'm working on a remake of a little-known Otto Preminger film from the early '60s called *Bunny Lake is Missing*. So there is a primary document that both the director and I refer to, the original film. In addition, about two years ago I did a draft that the director quite liked and so we're using that draft as a jumping off point. And yet he's bringing a host of compelling new ideas to the process. I tend to write 20 pages and then he follows me, revising them. And then I write 20 more and then he revises them. And each time we try and fold in one another's contributions.

BROCK: Who is the director?

WRIGHT: Joe Carnahan, who did a film called *Narc* and has a movie coming out called *Smokin' Aces*.

BROCK: I know the name.

WRIGHT: And it's so interesting, as someone who is primarily lost in the verbiage of the theater, to work with someone who really thinks in an unabashedly cinematic way. For example, I'd written a scene where two characters are coming to this English manor house and one character is explaining to the other how, while he loves the house, it's antiquated and he wants to modernize it, give it a contemporary feel. And it's quite a mouthful. This morning, Joe caught me on one of the gilded little paths to our Palm Springs resort and said, “I had an idea. What if they're approaching the manor house and all these gardeners with chainsaws are leveling the topiary?” And it was fantastic. Suddenly all my words about updating the place were rendered mute because he'd come up with this really jarring, deeply perverse, simultaneously hilarious and unsettling image that told the audience all of that. I find it really exciting when I can posit a dramatic impulse and he can spit it back to me, but in purely cinematic terms. It feels like just a continuing part of my education in what makes the two crafts different.

BROCK: It's funny because I'm listening and I'm nodding. But you can't see me nodding, of course.

WRIGHT: You're putting it in visual terms for us.

BROCK: Exactly. But I was thinking that at best this collaboration with very visual filmmakers is like tertiary education. As the writer you feel that you are in a process, not only of collaboration, but of a learning curve where you're being introduced to all sorts of visual abbreviations of ideas you've described in the script. I know that working with Kevin McDonald on *Last King of Scotland*, I felt myself to be working with someone who was extraordinarily gifted in this particular ability, not only to intellectualize what he felt the whole film was, but to be able to then dive into the detail of a given moment without losing a sense of where it sits in the film—and so never lose sight of what the tone and pace of a moment should be. And certainly one thing I've learned about writing from directing is to try, as the writer, to hold the film in your head as you go into the detail of a scene; to render the scene, but remember where it sits in the movie and how it's going to feel as a movie and not just something on the page. I'm doing an adaptation at the moment of *Brideshead Revisited* and time and again I find myself thinking, that reads well, but when I try and play the movie in my head, as it were, of that scene, I'll make all sorts of adjustments.

WRIGHT: I adore hearing you say that because it describes beautifully how writers and directors work on a project differently. Joe and I are working together on *Bunny Lake is Missing*. And yet, as the writer, I experience the film as a series of scenes that I'm manipulating on the computer. Whereas Joe, as the director, experiences it as an endless tape loop in his head.

BROCK: Yeah, exactly. And I think, actually, it's a mindset.

ON WRITING: Haven't you both had the experience of seeing your work up and performed and learning from that? Jeremy, certainly television is a lot about writing and seeing it played. And theater, Doug, my goodness, you see it night after night after night.

BROCK: But just to refer back to what we were saying earlier, I think because the media are so different, it is and it isn't the same. It doesn't feel the same. For my part, my apprenticeship in television felt very different than how I now work. The experience of collaboration was different. I was working at an insane speed, that's the first thing. And the storytelling was, well, bluntly, television then—maybe not so much now, but when I was in it 20 years ago—was largely told in two-shots and singles.

ON WRITING: Because of the speed.

BROCK: Yeah. Therefore, it was by its nature, dialogue driven. Yes, every now and then you could attempt a filmic flourish, but by and large you were dealing in dialogue-driven drama, and so it just didn't feel the same as the experience I've just described.

WRIGHT: There are so many choices that are made in mapping a scene in film. In the theater, there's one traditional perspective and it's from the proscenium, it's the audience's perspective. Hamlet can be mid-soliloquy and if the audience wants, their eye can wander to Ophelia listening to him. They can choose the perspective from which they view the scene. And in film, that's all chosen for you. If the camera is tight on Hamlet, then that's your only option. So the director has to make so many irreversible decisions about perspective that we in the theater don't always have to make. We have to accommodate a multiplicity of perspectives, but we don't have to render a definitive one. And so that's markedly different.

ON WRITING: So when you write a play, Doug, do you see it in your head the same way you do as when you write a movie, or you're not thinking in those terms?

WRIGHT: I'm always thinking of a play as a kind of recipe for a three-dimensional live event. It might sound absurd, but I find I feel far less like a conventional writer and much more like a cookbook author. I'm listing ingredients and

they're going to be tossed together a certain way to create a certain effect in three dimensions, and possibly even brought to realization by a chef I don't know in a city I've never visited. So it feels like you're creating a recipe that has to stand up over time because it's going to be reinterpreted again and again and again. Everybody's going to bake your lemon bundt cake, and hopefully each time they do, it'll turn out to be roughly the same approximation of the lemon bundt cake that was baked in Boston or Detroit or Houston. But film is different because a screenplay is only going to be interpreted once.

BROCK: But Doug's being insanely modest here. I've seen *I Am My Own Wife*. And I know that it is a recipe, but would it not also be fair to say that you guide the audience through the play with all kinds of technical skills: the emotional temperature at which you pitch each moment, the way in which the character addresses the proscenium arch or not, the silences you indicate are necessary at any given moment and the moments that are purely visual.... I think it's true to say that in film the director has to make a multiplicity of choices that, once they've locked the picture, they can never go back on. But watching that play, I was conscious of the hand of the writer guiding me to quite a degree, and I felt incredibly comfortable because in a strange way, as an audience, you need that. You need to feel comfortable. You need to feel that you're in the presence of someone who is in control of their medium.

WRIGHT: That is true, yeah.

BROCK: So even though, you're quite right, the eye can wander, in truth it doesn't all that much. I think if it wanders it's because Hamlet's lost it.

WRIGHT: That may well be true. But I do find there is a different sense of—I don't know how to articulate this, and maybe you can drag it out of me or better it—but the notion that when I'm writing a screenplay, it's a document that has to work once and work conclusively. And when I'm writing a play, I'm creating a template that has to stand multiple reinventions over time.

ON WRITING: I thought that was very well said.

BROCK: I neither want to better it nor add to it.

ON WRITING: I want to ask both of you about writing a play or film based upon real people, which you've both done more than once. Doug, in *Grey Gardens* you're really adhering to a portrait of Edith Bouvier Beale and “Little” Edie that's been created in the Maysles brothers' documentary. How did you create a musical from that material?

WRIGHT: It was really an almost absurd challenge to adapt a documentary film into a theater piece, because the demands of the mediums are so different and it was almost working backwards in a way. It was fascinating to work with the raw material of the movie, in part because, as a cinéma vérité documentary, it is so free associative. It's edited within an inch of its life but on first viewing it's almost formless. It has a kind of psychological logic that supercedes any kind of narrative logic. The more you watch these two

women behave in front of the camera, the more that is revealed about their psychology and their dynamic. You never really learn where they came from or how they fell on such arduous times, but you learn intimately about the devastating emotional dynamic, the push and pull that exists between mother and daughter. But it's extremely nonlinear and nonnarrative. And in adapting it for the stage—musicals are absolute slaves to narrative. Songs have to accelerate the story and reveal characters simultaneously, and you've got to have a conclusive beginning, a middle and an end. We had to create all that. And when the original documentary came out, these two women were all over the tabloids; they were a part of the public consciousness. The documentary didn't have to make a case for their relative importance. But ironically, the play does, since the two Edies have been largely forgotten. So the play, in its prologue, has to announce that these were celebrated and famous, even iconic, American women who fell into complete disrepair. You have to put your foot forward and say, "This is why attention must be paid."

ON WRITING: And what about dealing with Idi Amin in *Last King of Scotland*? Did you do a lot of research? How much did you know about him?

BROCK: Not a huge amount, and I did read around. I had the advantage of working in collaboration with Peter Morgan. Tangentially, I found the most useful piece of research to be a film called *Mephisto*, István Szabó's film that follows the story of an actor working in Nazi Germany.

WRIGHT: It's a brilliant movie.

BROCK: And the arc of that character's journey in some way parallels the arc of the fictional character's journey in *Last King of Scotland*, that being Nicholas Garrigan. He's in fact a conflation of three people who came within Amin's orbit. But for the purposes of the film we had to perform a strange trick, which I did in *Mrs. Brown* as well.

ON WRITING: *Mrs. Brown* was about Queen Victoria and her relationship with her personal servant, John Brown.

BROCK: Yes. But history is sequential, not consequential. And drama, particularly film, is very unforgiving of narrative that doesn't bring consequence. Consequence is plot. And so with these characters I found that in order to really invest myself in it, I had to forget that Garrigan was fictional and believe that he was as real as Amin, in the same way I had to kid myself that everything that went on between John Brown and Queen Victoria was as real as the moments I knew to be historical fact. I couldn't invest myself in them and therefore find the emotional truth of any moment if I had believed that one character was fictional, or one moment was less real than another. That can be difficult when you're dealing with a psychotic world leader because you're dealing with people's tragedies. And I found that really tricky.

ON WRITING: In what way was *Mephisto* useful?

BROCK: It trod such an assured path through that minefield, and it was so adroit on the nexus between corruption and seduction that goes on between Amin and Garrigan in the movie. Because if you look at the film as a narrative, the key moments are all reveals, they're all about at

what point Garrigan begins to realize how deeply he is mired in blood. And that demands a particular way of storytelling. In the end, we threw most of the research away and worked with the material we had. We tried to reorder it so those reveals were as chilling as possible and came at the right moments, so that we were neither too far ahead of Garrigan or too far behind him. You hold his hand through the movie, you go with him. And if you despise him too much for his naïveté or stupidity, then we've lost you.

ON WRITING: Or selfishness.

BROCK: Or selfishness. He's an antihero, but his selfishness has to be the selfishness of youth. It has to be the wildness of youth so you can understand and relate to it, I hope. If you don't, then we haven't done our job.

WRIGHT: I think what you're saying, too, about causality in narrative is so important. There's a naïve presumption that interesting people make for interesting plays or movies. And it's dangerous because our lives do not, contrary to popular opinion, have narrative or thematic continuity.

BROCK: No, they don't.

WRIGHT: That's the happy fiction that art serves us, and that's why we require it so ardently. I always cringe when I hear that horrible platitudinous "everything happens for a reason."

BROCK: Yeah, bollocks.

WRIGHT: In fact, no, it doesn't. There are horrible, random events—

BROCK: —Arbitrary horrors.

WRIGHT: And yet, if that platitude irritates me, I fuel it all the time because in every movie or play I write, I suggest that there is overriding thematic logic and a sense of narrative inevitability. In a rip-roaring good tale, everything *does* happen for a reason.

BROCK: But you've really struck home here because, isn't that the point? The point is that we go to art for its beauty and structure in order to get, if nothing else, relief from the awful existential truth—

WRIGHT: —Absolutely.

BROCK: If we couldn't suspend our disbelief to the extent of being that fooled, then really we would just take the kitchen knives out.

WRIGHT: Well, and it's so primal because the way our parents start to attempt to make order of the universe to us as children begins with the gorgeous lie of a story. Bedtime stories are our window to perceiving the world. And it's utterly fallacious because, again, a good story is going to have a logic that the world simply doesn't possess. Nevertheless, that's how we start to learn to order and categorize and name our experiences, through the telling of tales.

BROCK: Yes.

WRIGHT: So from an early age art gives us order that the world denies. Sometimes I think when you're working on an actual historical figure, you're required to invent to even greater lengths than when you're working with a fictional one. I'd be interested to ask—because I faced this challenge with *Grey Gardens*—Jeremy, when you were dealing with a character as iconic as Idi Amin, how did you arrive at and preserve the integrity of your *own* Idi Amin as opposed to, say, an actor who's read a different biography and wants to play him a certain way, or a director more drawn to another aspect of his story? In the incredible collaborative process that is film, how did you hang onto your vision of the man?

BROCK: Well, I think I have to hold my hand up here and say that the provenance of this was Giles Foden's novel. The experience differed from *Mrs. Brown* to this crucial degree: with *Mrs. Brown* I was dealing with a nonnarrative series of historical events. And with the story of *The Last King of Scotland*, we

had—Peter Morgan and I—Giles Foden’s novel as our template, and he had done the imagining for us. On *Mrs. Brown*, I was conscious of what you describe as the difficult task of taking characters who existed and creating my own vision of them. I can remember sitting on the floor of John Brown’s great, great, great nephew’s semi-detached house in the north of England, pouring over some letters that he had ostensibly written to Queen Victoria—

WRIGHT: Wow.

BROCK: —And thinking as I opened them, oh my God, no one’s seen this. I can remember at the time I was told, “These documents will not be released until the Queen Mother dies for a reason that I cannot tell you.” This got me even more excited. I was in a sweat. I read them, and my disappointment was so intense because while each individual document was perhaps moving—there were cards from him to her saying, “To my dear Vicky...”—by the end, I realized that there was no narrative value to this material. It was coloration. It was illustration. And I still had to find a narrative line, a causal line, as you put it, and at the same time steer a course that allowed those historians among the audience to say, “Yeah, she did do that then.” And boy oh boy, do they catch up with you.

WRIGHT: When you write a movie about a historical figure, it is an invitation to every overlooked academic with an axe to grind to finally get on the front page of *The New York Times*.

BROCK: You bet.

WRIGHT: And boy, do they seize the moment. Even in the critical community—it’s so funny, I remember working on *Quills* and suddenly there were headlines like, “Hollywood’s Vision of the Marquis de Sade.” And you just cringe and want to giggle because my take on the Marquis de Sade began as a small, relatively avant-garde production in an East Village theater in downtown New York; it was hardly representative of Hollywood’s mandate on a particular subject. But the moment it’s made into

a movie, it becomes Hollywood’s point of view and not your own. You must have faced that with both those films.

BROCK: Yes. But I’m all for the principle of individuation; I just let it go over my head after the event. I feel I am enough of a control freak already in my life and in my craft to not put myself through the hell of wondering whether I should, post hoc, try to control the perception that people have of my material.

WRIGHT: I think the most healthy gesture I ever made was to call my agent and say, “Yes, package up all the reviews in one plain manila envelope and send them directly to my parents. I need not read them.”

BROCK: And while we’re on that—you’ve struck on something else there—I stopped reading reviews in 1986 when a reviewer for the *Evening Standard* named Nicholas de Jongh, who still works here in London, wrote a particularly scathing review of a student piece I had written. And I realized then that I was neither going to be as good nor as bad as he or my mother said. And you can guess which said what. From that moment on, I have stuck to that promise to myself because it’s toxic—either way, actually, toxic either way. I think it can fill your head with such nonsense that you can’t do the business of writing well.

ON WRITING: I want to ask about a sensitive subject, rewriting a script that somebody else has written. How do you approach those projects, also knowing that it will probably be done to you, as well, I guess.

WRIGHT: I thank God for my parallel career in the theater only because I’m reluctant to do original film projects. I do adaptations or rewrites because I believe in my soul that if it’s going to be an original idea of mine, a dream that I want to bring to fruition, then I emphatically need to hold its copyright and it needs to be a play. That’s just a mechanism I’ve arrived at to keep myself sane.

BROCK: But I think as a consequence of your extraordinary talent, you've found a wonderful balance there, and I think it's the key to sanity.

WRIGHT: Oh, well, you're making me blush. You can't see that either.

BROCK: And I'm nodding. But it's true, Doug.

WRIGHT: If you told me that, in the future, I would have to commit full time to either playwriting or screenwriting, I'd be devastated. One allows you complete creative autonomy but can be terribly solitary; the other demands compromise but it's intensely collaborative.

ON WRITING: Which is which?

WRIGHT: Playwriting can be very, very solitary for long periods of time.

BROCK: And film is so collaborative.

WRIGHT: Film is so social. So while I regard them as extraordinarily different crafts, I think if you can practice both of them, you can find a curiously balanced life. I'm not being flip or glib when I say playwriting basically has no currency in our culture, it's hopelessly rarified. It's like saying I'm a gothic stone carver or I blow glass for a living. And if I were solely a playwright, I couldn't pay my mortgage every month. The gorgeous thing about film is it's a tenable profession for a genuine writer.

BROCK: Yeah.

WRIGHT: And so I look to it for society, I look to it for the thrill of collaboration, I look to it to meet creative minds greater than my own so I can learn from them and I look to it for health insurance.

BROCK: And certainly, if I'm honest, I believe that my step into directing was partly to find some equilibrium and relief from the particular agonies of development in film. Because though it's true that it's a wonderful collaboration and the relationships that can evolve with people are remarkable, there's no doubt that the fourth unproduced script you put on the shelf can hurt to a degree that leaves you feeling very raw. And I know that one reason I stepped into directing was simply to feel myself hands-on in a process that I knew, come hell or high water, I would see through to the end.

WRIGHT: When it comes to rewriting other writer's screenplays, you're usually given a very specific directive, a highly targeted mission: make it funnier, give the lead a richer character arc, streamline the narrative, add a romance—and do it all in less than a week. But the financial rewards are often considerable.

BROCK: Yes.

WRIGHT: In the end, you've got no choice. You just trust the Guild's arbitration process and swallow the result. I think that is the open-eyed stance you take walking into those jobs.

BROCK: I agree. I'm involved in a rewrite now and I'm aware that I'm going into it as a ghost and coming out as a ghost. And that's fine because, as Doug said, you go in aware that's what's going to happen. The rewards are commensurate with your invisibility.

ON WRITING: Do you feel that you keep in somebody else's tone? Are you looking to go in there and just fix what needs to be fixed?

BROCK: I think it's a little more arbitrary than that, because it depends. If you're working with a director

who knows he's only got you for three weeks and he's desperately hungry for a different vision, you're often working very closely with what he wants to achieve. You're acutely aware of the stress he's under. Often you're literally listening and interpreting. Other times, they may leave you on your own and you may live with the other person's vision of the script. I don't know how Doug feels, but I find every day in that process can be different. It can be working with the director on a moment, working alone with the other writer's vision of it, going back to the source material, if it exists.... You're very much aware of the different demands that come each day, because sometimes it's a greenlit project, too.

WRIGHT: Jeremy is, I think, really right. When you're brought in as a ghostwriter or a doctor, the screenplay no longer belongs to the original writer. It's community property. Sure, there was one hallowed moment when the project belonged to Writer Number One and he or she was feverishly crafting it in glorious isolation, tinkering over each word. But now that moment is long past. When you come into these situations to meet the director, you see the script sitting on the desk, production designs against the wall, storyboards across the sofa and notes from nine producers and 62 studio executives crumpled on a clipboard. And somewhere hovering between all these documents and the director's imagination lies the movie. And so you have to—

BROCK: —You're negotiating.

WRIGHT: —You're negotiating with all those elements to try and throw whatever's required into the pot. The actual script is just one of a hundred considerations at this point, it no longer belongs to the previous writer. It's become the collective dominion of the film. And you're serving the film.

BROCK: And you're truly invisible in a way that you are not when you're in that hallowed place as the initial author.

WRIGHT: It's true.

BROCK: And I think you accept that.

WRIGHT: Yeah.

BROCK: And it's a different dance, it's a different dance.



BIOGRAPHIES



JEREMY BROCK most recently co-wrote *The Last King of Scotland* with Peter Morgan which was awarded Best Adapted Screenplay by BAFTA. He also wrote and directed the film *Driving Lessons*, which won the Special Jury Prize, Audience Award and Russian Film Critic's Award at the Moscow International Film Festival, 2006.

His other screenplays include *Mrs. Brown* which was nominated for a BAFTA Award for Best Original Screenplay, *Charlotte Gray* and *The Widowmaker*, a film for television, nominated for a BAFTA Award for Best Single Drama.

His television credits include the long-running BBC drama series, *Casualty*, which he co-created and another BBC series, *Plotlands*. He also wrote the television drama *15: The Life and Death of Phillip Knight* which was broadcast on ITV and won the Prix Europa for Best Single Drama.

Jeremy Brock's career began in 1985 with his play *In Times Like These* which premiered at the Bristol Old Vic. He wrote an adaptation of Dickens' *Oliver Twist* which also played at the Bristol Old Vic in 1990.



Most recently, DOUG WRIGHT wrote the book for the Broadway musical *Grey Gardens*. He is currently adapting Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, slated to open on Broadway later this year. In 2004, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, a Tony Award for Best Play, the Drama Desk Award, a GLAAD Media Award, an Outer Critics Circle Award, a Drama League Award and a Lucille

Lortel Award for his play *I Am My Own Wife*.

Earlier in his career, Wright won an Obie Award for outstanding achievement in playwriting and the Kesselring Award for Best New American Play from the National Arts Club for his play *Quills*. He went on to write the screenplay adaptation, which was nominated for a Golden Globe Award and received the Paul Selvin Award from the Writer's Guild of America, west. His television credits include the television special *Tony Bennett: An American Classic*.

Wright was recently cited with an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Tolerance Prize from the KulturForum Europa. He is a member of the Dramatists Guild and the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers. He currently serves on the board of the New York Theatre Workshop.

The Back Page

BETTY COMDEN AND JULES FEIFFER

NEW YORK CITY — NOVEMBER 19, 2004



*As collaborators for more than 60 years, Betty Comden and Adolph Green were writers and performers who wrote books and lyrics for musical comedies that included *On The Town*, *Wonderful Town* and *Bells Are Ringing*. They wrote screenplays for some of the best musicals MGM produced including *The Barkleys of Broadway*, *The Bandwagon* and *Singin' In The Rain*. Theirs was a partnership that ended only when Adolph Green died in 2002. Betty Comden died a few months ago, in November 2006. We're publishing this interview as a tribute to both her and Adolph Green.*

FEIFFER: I've always wanted to ask, *On The Town* was the first time you guys were called to Hollywood, is that right?

COMDEN: No, the first movie was *Good News*.

FEIFFER: Oh, *Good News*.

COMDEN: Yeah. We finally got around to doing *On The Town*, but it was much, much, much later. MGM had bought it, a pre-production deal; it was an incredible thing, an incredible amount of money, too. It was sort of a miracle. But they held onto it quite a long time. And then when we got out to Hollywood, already they were very down on *On The Town*—we were warned not to bring it up. I thought they'd never make it and when they did, they made it very different.

FEIFFER: I remember.

COMDEN: So that was upsetting, to be there and know they had our show and they never wanted to do it. So the first thing we got was *Good News*. It's an old college musical about football and the hero flunking his French exam—only it was astronomy in the original and Adolph and I made this bold change, we made the subject French. And in the course of it we wrote a wonderful number called "The French Lesson."

FEIFFER: Which was the most memorable thing from that movie. It's what everybody remembers.

COMDEN: I must say, Peter [Lawford] called us as soon as he got assigned to it and said, "Jesus, get me out of this. I'll be a laughing stock. I can't

play an American football hero." He was adorable though, he was fine in it.

FEIFFER: He was good, he was. And June Allyson was the teacher, right?

COMDEN: Yes.

FEIFFER: She was his girlfriend.

COMDEN: And in "The French Lesson," the thing was that Peter spoke impeccable French. And June had this Midwest accent. It was really funny.

FEIFFER: What other songs did you have in that? Because mostly I remember them being rehashes from the show.

COMDEN: Yeah, most of them—

FEIFFER: "Lucky in Love—"

COMDEN:—"The Varsity Drag," of course, which we didn't write. We wrote extra verses for all sorts of things. There was something called "He's a Lady's Man." We were appalled when we were assigned to do that movie because it seemed so remote from anything we had ever written or were connected with. But it turned out to be a cute picture, people liked it.

ON WRITING: Were you under contract to MGM and then just put on whatever movie they wanted?

COMDEN: Well, no, we went picture by picture. We signed for two movies, or then for three movies spread out over a period of time. Because we

always wanted to write for the theater and live in New York where our families were. So we refused all offers asking us to move out there and sign a long movie contract.

FEIFFER: *Good News* was after *On The Town* was on in New York, is that right?

COMDEN: Oh, yes. It was about a year after, 1945.

ON WRITING: I just want to go back to before *On The Town*, you and Adolph started out as performers in a group called The Revuers. Could you talk about that?

COMDEN: Well, The Revuers was Adolph and me, Judy Holliday and two other boys—five of us. And it happened one day that Judy walked in out of a rainstorm—she was always walking in rainstorms, it seems to me—but she came into this doorway which turned out to be the Village Vanguard. She got talking to the owner—Max Gordon, his name was, not to be confused with the theatrical producer of the same name—and he was a charming guy—did you know him?

FEIFFER: I knew Max, yes.

COMDEN: I somehow had a feeling you did. He was running this nightclub, he had no entertainment, but he had Village poets get up and read their poetry and people would pitch a few quarters into the middle of the floor.

FEIFFER: That was before he had jazz in there?

COMDEN: Oh, way before. So when Judy got talking to Max, he said he wanted to change the Vanguard and did she know any young people who were in the theater. She said, yes, she knew one, Adolph. And so she told Adolph what the idea was, to come down to the space and perform satirical numbers or whatever. And we started by using other people's material.

ON WRITING: Like whose?

COMDEN: We got some of the best, S.J. Perelman. But very soon we couldn't afford to buy material, so we chipped in and bought a pencil and we all wrote—mostly Adolph and Judy and me.

FEIFFER: Judy wrote also?

COMDEN: Yeah. We were doing revue material, sketches and some songs. There was one about three psychopathic movie villains, Charles Laughton, Peter Lorre and Robert Montgomery, who had done *Night Must Fall*.... The shows were like that. We made a newspaper show, a Hollywood show, a magazine show—we roughly put stuff into those categories. We started at the Vanguard one night a week and then, by several months later, we were doing the whole week. And we just stayed together for a long, long time. The group gradually broke up, as happens, and Judy wound up in Hollywood. Adolph and I stayed together and the group was reduced to two, just him and me. We had no idea where it was going, but then Lenny [Bernstein] and Jerome Robbins did the wonderful ballet *Fancy Free*, and out of that came an idea to do a show. So we were included, and we just started to write it.

FEIFFER: And that show was *On The Town*.

COMDEN: Yes.

FEIFFER: My assumption is that the show was a real collaboration where you had lots of autonomy.

COMDEN: It was our first show and we were so thrilled when George Abbott, the veteran director and theater person, loved it and wanted to direct it. We were all about 26 years old, I think, Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins and Adolph and me. And of course it was an immense happening in our lives, to have it actually get on stage. It was thrilling. We wrote ourselves two parts in it: Adolph was one of the three sailors, Ozzie, and I was the anthropologist. And we met in the Museum of Modern Art, where I came in and mistook him for a prehistoric man. And then we had a wonderful number called "Carried

Away.” Adolph and I had never written straight songs or ballads. We wrote revue material only. But for the show we had to write songs, and we did. Lenny was going off on a conducting tour and before going, he wrote out two sheets of music and said, “When I come back, let’s have some songs for this show.” So while he was away, we got the music to what turned out to be “Lucky To Be Me” and “Lonely Town.” But we had to learn how to do everything, write a story and make characters that would come to certain points where they had to sing.

ON WRITING: Did you make a lot of mistakes and have to go back and rewrite?

COMDEN: I don’t know what you mean by mistakes. We wrote a rough book first. And we knew it wasn’t much good. So we said, “Just give us another week,”—two weeks, I think we said—“We’re going to rewrite the whole thing.” And we did. We worked like fury and we rewrote the whole book, and we gave it to our collaborators and to George Abbott. I remember the excitement. He lived in Port Washington, George did, and he took the script out with him over the weekend, and he called us up when he got home and he said, “I wanted to jump off the train and tell you how wonderful it was.” Ah, well, it was so thrilling. We really had made a good book that was close to what played finally.

FEIFFER: Now, how much of *Fancy Free* was in *On The Town*?

COMDEN: None of it was in *On The Town*. We made it about three sailors with a one-day, 24-hour leave in New York. Then we made up the other characters

and put them together. And it was hard, I remember. We used whatever we had absorbed over our years from going to the theater, whatever we admired. Adolph and I agreed very much on what we liked and didn’t like and so that made working together fun. George Abbott, when he said he would do the show told us, “But I only have 10 days to stay with you.” So we thought, 10 whole days! We didn’t realize that you don’t go out of town with the director for less than four weeks. But we had George, and that was very exciting.

FEIFFER: Where did you go out of town?

COMDEN: Boston.

FEIFFER: And how did it go in Boston?

COMDEN: Very well. It was fun. I remember the third song, “Some Other Time” we wrote at night in the window of a music store on the Commons in Boston. They allowed us to go up there and use the piano, and there we were, in the middle of the night, sitting up in this music store writing. And it was an altogether exciting time.

FEIFFER: Sounds like an MGM musical.

COMDEN: We should have put that in the movie, but we had no control over the movie.

ON WRITING: When you started out, did you and Adolph think you would be writers as much as performers? I mean, I think of you both as writers. So was that a switch in your mind?

COMDEN: Something like that. While we were doing *On The Town*, for which, as I say, we wrote

ourselves parts, we were thinking ahead to our next show and we didn't want to be in it, we didn't want to do that any more, we just wanted to write.

FEIFFER: That's interesting. Did you know you could write this stuff when you started writing?

COMDEN: No, of course not.

FEIFFER: And how did you stumble on the process of collaboration, you and Adolph? Did you just fall into it?

COMDEN: Well, in *The Revuers* we all wrote, but Adolph and I did most of it. And our feeling was that we would stay together as writers. And while we were still *The Revuers*, the idea for *On The Town* happened.

FEIFFER: Now, when you went out to Hollywood for the first time, it was very, very different from New York.

COMDEN: Oh, God, yes. Well, you know that.

FEIFFER: Yes.

COMDEN: Actually, we were very well treated as writers. Writers are usually not treated very well. But we were with a unit called the Arthur Freed Unit. We did all our movies with Arthur Freed and we worked with people we had known for all our lives. Gene Kelly was an old friend.

FEIFFER: He and Stanley Donen were the directors of the movie *On The Town*. Did you have much to do with them in the making?

COMDEN: Oh, yeah, we were very good friends and we used to meet all the time and talk about our work. And then they also did *Singin' In The Rain*. They were terrific, wonderful directors.

FEIFFER: *Singin' In The Rain*, unlike *On The Town* was an original, just done for the movies.

COMDEN: Just for the movies.

FEIFFER: How did that start, were these old songs or—

COMDEN: Yeah, exactly. One day we walked into Arthur Freed's office—he had been a lyricist as a younger man, very successful. And he said “Kids,” he always called us kids, “You're going to write a movie called *Singin' In The Rain* and put all my songs in it.”

FEIFFER: I guess if you run a unit at a studio, you can say things like that.

COMDEN: Yeah. So we did. That's more or less what happened. He had a lot of good songs in his catalogue, so everything in the movie is written by him and his partner with a strange name, Nacio Herb Brown.

FEIFFER: Was he still around at the time?

COMDEN: Yeah, he was around. We didn't have very much contact with him, we just made a list of all of Arthur's songs and we started to write the screenplay—and everyone got very excited about it, which was nice, wonderful. Gene was an immense star, he could do anything he wanted. So that was

quite an experience for us. *American in Paris* was shooting on the lot when we were trying to write *Singin' In The Rain*. We wandered down from our offices to the sound stage where they were shooting and we thought, oh, we'll never get to this stage. Our movie will never make it. And then we'd go back to the office and write some more. And finally, it all fell into place.

ON WRITING: Did you have a lot of freedom to write what you wanted in *Singin' In The Rain*?

COMDEN: Well, we were always under strict rules when we went to work. But I think Arthur Freed was fairly good about what we put in the movies. And we had another ally, a man named Roger Edens, who was Freed's associate on some pictures and partner on others. He was a very versatile, very talented, tall, husky voice, Southerner, very charming man. We would discuss everything with him—the book, the picture and then picking out the songs—and just stayed in close touch with him because we felt comfortable.

FEIFFER: On the “Make ‘Em Laugh” number, I had heard the story that Arthur Freed didn't realize he had rewritten Cole Porter's song, “Be A Clown.”

COMDEN: No, he didn't. I remember Irving Berlin came to visit the lot one day—Arthur Freed and he were great friends—and Arthur said, “Come on, I want to play you something.” He brought Berlin down to the set and we thought, my God, he's going to play “Make ‘Em Laugh.” And exactly that happened. Irving sat there and sort of let it roll over him. He looked puzzled a little bit.

Then he got up and said, “Who wrote that?” And Freed said, “Well, the kids and I got together and, uh—come along, Irving!” And he grabbed Irving and pulled him out of the sound stage where they were playing “Make ‘Em Laugh” and took him to another set. But it was just hilarious. We laughed forever about that. “Come along, Irving” became a password.

FEIFFER: Were the lyrics on “Make ‘Em Laugh” Arthur's or—

COMDEN: Arthur's. Everything in that movie is by Arthur.

FEIFFER: So you guys had nothing to do with any of the music.

COMDEN: No, we just had to choose it. You know, when you do a catalogue picture like that, you're given a sack of music and out of that, you make your movie.

ON WRITING: Were you guys involved in every aspect of the movie, or did you just write the script and then not really—

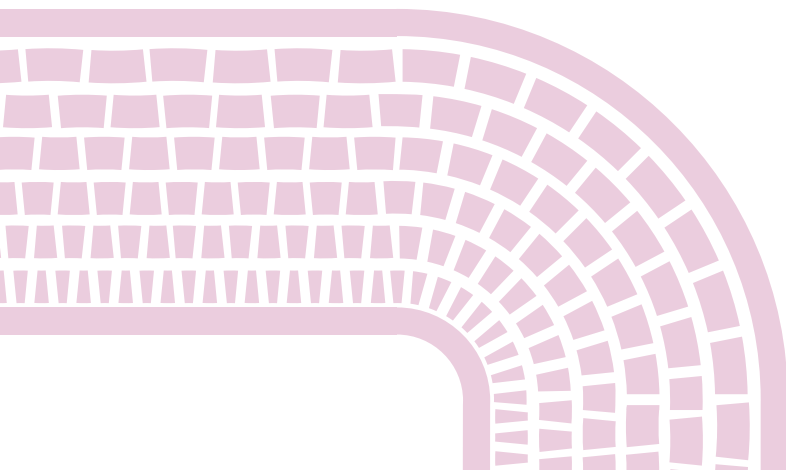
COMDEN: We went to a lot of rehearsals but we didn't really take part in the day-to-day shooting. We could go down and watch as much as we wanted to, and we did—we were, as I say, close friends with Gene and we saw him and Stanley all the time and kept talking about the picture.

FEIFFER: Now, how directly involved were you with *Bells Are Ringing*, the movie?

COMDEN: Not very. We just held out until we found a studio that would use Judy [Holliday]. Can you believe that? Several studios wanted to buy it, and MGM finally bought it.

FEIFFER: But she was a big star. Why didn't they want to use her?

COMDEN: I don't know why.



ON WRITING: Was she a star in film yet?

FEIFFER: Oh, yes. *Born Yesterday*, she won an Academy Award.

COMDEN: It was ridiculous. But we held off, and MGM said that they'd star Judy, so we gave it to them.

FEIFFER: Did Jule Styne give you the score and then—

COMDEN: No, it was all together. We had the idea and then we wrote a sort of rough idea of the book. And when you're writing a musical you always think, where will these people sing? Singing is supposed to take place when words don't work anymore. So we looked through and found all the places where we thought we should have songs, and Jule was in on all of that. It's a highly collaborative thing. Jule was very brilliant, and very prolific. He was always saying, "You want to hear the greatest song?" He'd come in and play it, and we wouldn't respond much. He'd say, "Well, how about this?"

FEIFFER: So he'd play something, and you two would respond to it and then you'd, what, throw out lines?

COMDEN: No, then we'd sit with him and write the lyrics with the music; he'd keep playing it and playing it, and we'd be writing the words. Sometimes we'd have the idea for the song—it would come out of the story and we would have to turn it into a lyric.

FEIFFER: How did "The Party's Over" come about?

COMDEN: It was a moment where Judy would have to sing, her character was broken-hearted, and in the show there was a party going on that was over. We just got together with Jule one day and said, "We should certainly have a song here, and it should be called 'The Party's Over.'" Jule went to the piano and started playing. And it went back and forth between us, and we had a song.

FEIFFER: In some ways it reminds me of "Lonely Town" in terms of mood. Very different pieces of music, and yet there's the same, similar sense of mournful solitude and depth.

COMDEN: And the end of something, yeah.

FEIFFER: What was the last movie you and Adolph worked on? Do you remember?

COMDEN: It was a movie called *What A Way To Go!*.

ON WRITING: With Shirley MacLaine.

COMDEN: I tell you, we originally wrote it for Marilyn Monroe. But that didn't happen, and we were never happy or proud of it.

FEIFFER: But you did all right in terms of the movies that were successful.

COMDEN: Oh, yeah. *The Band Wagon* we're very proud of. I love that picture.

FEIFFER: It's a wonderful picture.

ON WRITING: Were you involved at all in production on it?

COMDEN: No. I think I may have gone by shooting once or twice, but we couldn't afford to stay out there and not be on salary, and when we finished the script we were suddenly off salary.

FEIFFER: Oh, so they didn't keep you around to do rewrites as they needed them?

COMDEN: No, no, they didn't.

FEIFFER: Now, in those MGM years, when you didn't live out there, you sure did a lot of work out there. So did you finish a movie script, come back to New York and work on a Broadway show?

COMDEN: Yeah, very often it was just like that. And we couldn't—you asked about rewrites for the picture—well, if they wanted us, they had to send for us and pay us. We did some. I remember doing a little work for Gene and Stanley. I think it was a line they wanted, I don't know which film, *Singin' In The Rain*, or something else.

ON WRITING: *It's Always Fair Weather* maybe?

COMDEN: Yeah, maybe.

ON WRITING: Did you write any movies that never got made?

COMDEN: No.

ON WRITING: No?

FEIFFER: Oh my God, Betty.

ON WRITING: How did that happen?

COMDEN: Well, I guess we were so brilliant they couldn't not do—no, I don't know.

ON WRITING: You guys wrote the screenplay for *On The Town*. Was it painful then, to throw out nearly all the songs?

COMDEN: Oh, yes, it was awful. It was just terrible.

FEIFFER: They didn't think Lenny could write music, is that it?

COMDEN: That's right. They thought that the score was too difficult, the public won't respond to it—imagine that insanity.

FEIFFER: That score remains, after all of these years, one of the great scores.

ON WRITING: What are some of your favorite songs that you've written?

COMDEN: “Lonely Town.” And well, we had our first hits with Jule Styne. That was a new experience. “Just In Time” and “The Party's Over.” And something called “Long Before I Knew You” which is also from *Bells*. And then the songs with Lenny had gotten to be better and better known over the years, like “Lonely Town.”

ON WRITING: And “Some Other Time.”

COMDEN: “Some Other Time.” That's a lovely song. I can tell you about “Lonely Town.” Frank Sinatra was in the movie, as you know, of *On The Town*. And Arthur Freed had promised him that he would sing “Lonely Town” somewhere in the movie. And then they came in one day and said, “That's a wrap.” And so Frank said, “When do I do ‘Lonely Town?’ ” They said, “Oh, that's out, forget about that.” Well, as only he could explode, he exploded. And years later, I remember, Adolph and I were at Radio City Music Hall when Frank played there and at the end of whatever number he said, “Now I'm going to sing you a song I was supposed to sing in the movie *On The Town* and they never let me do it.” And he said, “Wherever you are, Arthur Freed, down there, burning up, listen, I'm singing it now!” Adolph and I were there, of course, laughing—he was so outraged, he really still kept that rage.

FEIFFER: I heard a recording of him singing it which is just beautiful.

COMDEN: He had a special arrangement made and it was a wonderful one. It was terrific.

ON WRITING: Did you and Adolph miss performing?

COMDEN: We loved performing, but we didn't want to be in our shows. We never planned to.

ON WRITING: Why?

COMDEN: I think life got too complicated.

FEIFFER: But you did your own shows, you did *A Party*.

COMDEN: Yeah, so we finally did *A Party* which was just us and stuff we'd written over the years. That was really fun, we had a good time with that.

FEIFFER: Fun for everybody.

ON WRITING: I have one more question. *Wonderful Town*, which you and Adolph also wrote with Leonard Bernstein, is currently playing in revival on Broadway and I know you went to see it a few times. Is it a thrill every time you hear the orchestra play the overture for one of your shows?

COMDEN: Yes, it is.

ON WRITING: Is it as much of a thrill as it was the first time?

COMDEN: I can't measure it, if I'm thrilled, I'm thrilled. It's wonderful to hear your own stuff, it is.

