

## BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture: Emma Thompson 20 September 2014 at BFI Southbank

[As the audience take their seats Emma Thompson is already on stage, barefoot and dressed down in dungarees and a hooded sweatshirt. The stage is set out like a room, with a chair, writing desk, yoga mat and a box of draft scripts. Emma Thompson silently wanders around the room, sometimes writing at the desk, sometimes practicing yoga positions, sometimes lounging in the chair. As the audience settles, she cleans the desk and vacuums the floor, before walking off-stage to applause]

[Clip from *The Magic Roundabout*]

[Applause]

[Emma Thompson returns to the stage in a change of clothes, with Jeremy Brock]

**Emma Thompson:** As if by magic!

**Jeremy Brock:** Emma Thompson, ladies and gentlemen.

[Applause]

**ET:** Hello. I just wanted you to know, without me having to tell you, how I write, because that's how I write. I've left my water over there. This is, I've got a purple yoga mat, there are rarely chips but it's a good idea now come to think of it, and I have a little table about that size, that's sort of what it looks like. And that's what I do, I Hoover, I find odd places to polish, you know places that I haven't seen in a long time, sometimes parts of my own body.

**JB:** That's a good idea, and why not?

**ET:** I think it's good to know what the process is like. There's a lot of weeping as well, there's a lot of crying in foetal positions.

**JB:** A lot of crying, foetal position crying. Erm, darling, *The Magic Roundabout*, what's your relationship to that? Tell us a bit about that.

**ET:** Well I thought I might as well start at the beginning since we're talking about writing, and I think that it's very interesting where writing comes from,

where your relationship with words comes from. And I think mine comes, yes from reading of course, but from my father who wrote *The Magic Roundabout* and was an actor who was said, that the BBC gave him these little French films and said, "Would you write the scripts for them because we can't put them on in French." And my father who hated the French openly, was very rude in fact to Serge Danot who created those puppets, there was never much warmth between them, and he would sit at this funny little machine which he would work with his foot, it was a reel to reel, and he would sit writing these scripts. And they were completely, they were nothing to do with the French, the French was very, it was a bit twee you know [*does French impression*], and also they had different names. And the French thought that Dougal was a pun on de Gaulle, some of you will know what that means but some of you won't because we're getting so old. Anyway, de Gaulle was the President of France at the time. And of course he wasn't, dad just said that was evidence of their complete egocentricity. But I watched him concentrate, as a little girl I watched, I stood at his feet just watching him just sitting there with his headphones on with his old machine for hours and hours and hours on end.

**JB:** And is that how he scripted it?

**ET:** And that was how he scripted it. He just watched the pictures and made things up, which if you think about it screenplay writing is the same thing only the other way round.

**JB:** And I was thinking, when we talked about this, there's something else about language and about how language can be both a positive thing and a dangerous thing.

**ET:** Oh yes, absolutely. Well his relationship with language was remarkable because he was a working class self-made man with very little education, and so he taught himself a lot. He was a deeply articulate man who had a very serious stroke when he was 48 and stopped being able to speak, and then understood that his reliance upon language was dangerous and

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sometimes that he had been and used language quite crudely, often with humour. And I'm aware of my own reliance upon language and articulacy, and I'm very aware of that danger that there is that you can be glib, you can be too quick, and I have been I'm sure in the past. But he also taught me something else about it which I'm sure relates to things we're going to talk about later, which was that he was writing things for children ostensibly, these were, and he made no concession to that whatsoever. He said children are just people who simply haven't lived as long as we have, so there's no need or reason to talk down to them as though they are from another planet. So he would use words like "hoist by your own petard" in *The Magic Roundabout* programmes and then get letters from ladies saying, "You can't use language like that for children, they won't understand it." And he wrote back to these people, he got out the dictionary I remember and looked up all the longest words he could find and put them into his replies. He also got a letter from a young boy once who said, "I called my sister a mollusc once and my mum hit me," so he had to write back to this lady and say, "You really shouldn't, because mollusc is not a rude word."

**ET:** So I grew up with that. And like Alan Bennett who grew up with a father who would chase a dog out of his butcher's shop with the words, "Get out of here you filthy lamppost smelling article," you understand where it all comes from and it's interesting. Anyway, I thought it might divert you.

**JB:** No, I really like that, the derivation of it, and we will come back to that. Tell me, you went to university, you started writing when? How old were you when you started writing?

**ET:** Erm, I starting writing, I always wrote, I wrote stories at school. When I started writing sketches, I was doing sketches with Footlights when I was 18, 19. Actually, I started writing sketches and performing sketches when I was 16, and the first sketch I ever performed was a monologue by George Melly. So monologues and sketches were what I grew up with. And one time the

Footlights, that is me and amongst others Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie, were holed up by snow in the Birmingham Exhibition Centre, and we had been performing at the Philips Small Appliances Campaign dinner, and I was about to do a song in a huge Tam o' Shanter, this size, and a big black mac, and I was following a stripper who was doing the Philips Ladyshave. She was sitting on...there were all these businessmen, Philips businessmen, all sitting there with their heads in their soup because they were so drunk, watching this stripper with the Philips Ladyshave. That's what I had to come on after in a gigantic Tam o' Shanter doing [*sings in Scottish accent*] "I worked for 14 years at the castle of the mark." I mean, I died the death, we all did. And then we were snowed in and we were stuck there, so I sat and wrote a sketch about a woman being caught in a traffic jam just outside Carshalton. Yes, it wasn't very funny at the time actually but I tried, I did try. But that's when I started writing sketches because I was very much influenced by Stephen, Hugh and all that lot and Footlights really.

**JB:** And you and Sandi Toksvig when you were auditioning...

**ET:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

**JB:** Because that's interesting too I think.

**ET:** Yes, well Stephen and Hugh were always so brilliant and funny, and it was very difficult to sort of get in sideways really because they were so wonderful, and Footlights was quite male-dominated. So Sandi Toksvig and I did an all-female revue called *Woman's Hour*, and it wasn't an overtly feminist review although there were those at the time and they were great too, but we just wrote a revue, and got lots of people to help. And we auditioned women because we were very exercised by the fact that people would say, "Well women aren't funny." And we'd say, "Yes they are. They're very funny. Laugh all the bloody time. Watch a woman just walking down the street and start laughing. Very funny people altogether, it's always funny." And then we auditioned quite a lot of women who weren't funny at all, and so bang went

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that argument. But that's all the nature/nurture thing about your confidence really, actually, because being funny is all to do with being confident and not minding...

**JB:** And not about the male Venus/Mars thing at all.

**ET:** Oh the male, the Venus/Mars thing is so awful, and I think as writers we've really got to come to terms with the fact that our brains are essentially the same. They're the same, I'm sorry. I mean I know it's unfortunate when parts of it get lodged between your legs for periods of time, but you know it can happen to both sexes, it really can.

**JB:** It can and does.

**ET:** Yes.

**JB:** So on that note, you're writing sketches. You're working with what kind of comedians? You mentioned to me Andy de la Tour, Alexei Sayle, because I'm interested in how influenced the writing, that period before we come to the first monologue.

**ET:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, it was a long period of time, it was long, and I was doing sort of bits of stand-up as well, and we finished at university and doing sketch stuff and then we went on and did sketch stuff. We did *Botham*, *The Musical* in Australia, and then we did, we went and did a, you know middlingly decent sketch show called *Alfresco* in Manchester for several years. So we carried on earning money doing sketch shows, and at Edinburgh we would do sketch shows, and so I think I'm profoundly influenced by all of that. So when I started writing anything longer, it was a bit like acting really, when I was asked to act I thought, oh well it's just like doing a sketch, only for longer. And stand-up was a great training just in how not to die when you're more frightened that you have ever been and will ever be ever, ever, ever.

**JB:** Yes. Erm, we're gonna do a monologue from around that time, but just before we do do you want to just give a little bit of context, well because

there's that Lenny Bruce that we might have played but we didn't have time.

**ET:** No.

**JB:** And it would be quite interesting because you mentioned the George Melly and those sorts of influences. Do you want to just mention that?

**ET:** Well I think writing always has roots, which is why nothing is wasted ever. You know and you hear things on buses, or you hear. I heard this sketch, Lenny Bruce on *How to Relax Your Coloured Friends at Parties*; he just keeps going on about watermelon. But it was written in the '60s you know when racism, and he was living right in the centre of it, and the jazz world of course you know. And then, the sketch I mentioned by George Melly was about a Hampstead liberal hostess talking about how fantastic it was that she had a black man at her party. I know, well you see the thing is we've kind of got past that now, I mean let's hope, but it was the early 1970s and so this was very cutting edge political writing. And so I wrote something slightly later on for a solo show I did in Edinburgh which was about, you won't remember, well some of you will remember, but there was a time, and God knows this is, we've got Syrians taking their place now, we have Ethiopians, we have..., but there was a time when Vietnamese people were coming here and they were called 'boat people' because they were coming on boats to Britain. And it was a terrible time for Vietnam, and it was after the war and they were in a terrible state, and I wrote something, because everything was political in those days, we wrote an awful lot of political material and all of the comedy that I wrote really was political and it was about everything that I cared about, everything. I mean I would lie under a desk like that [*points to desk*] weeping because trying to be funny is awful. I'll do a bit of this for you, I might not be able to remember it but.

**JB:** I've got the script if you need it.

**ET:** You've got the script, that's good. I've got the yoga mat as well, so if I go under I'll just do a standing dog and

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that'll be just as interesting. So you're in an art gallery, say, and so that's the art gallery there, that's the walls and [to audience] you are the pictures, and anyway so.

[Emma Thompson delivers monologue]

[Applause]

**ET:** It's interesting, because what's interesting to me about performing that now is at the time I was doing that out of a kind of self-hating middle class thing, and now I'm terribly interested in Marjorie and how often her husband hits her, because clearly that's what's happening you know. She's been abused at some point or other. But it was also that thing of having to empathise somehow with things that you simply can't empathise with.

**JB:** And also there's that synthesis of comedy and politics that you were talking about, because it's very clear in that when you hear it. I'm going to do something a bit lateral now, because we talked about this, and I'm going to talk about failure.

**ET:** Oh yeah.

**JB:** Yeah.

**ET:** Oh yeah.

**JB:** Yeah. Well, when we were talking about this evening and you were talking about failure and you know, people's preconceptions because of the trajectory of your career, and so we're going to go back to talking about revues. Before we do, we should put it in context with *Thompson*. So, you were commissioned to write that sketch show?

**ET:** I was commissioned to write a sketch show in the mid-80s, '85/'86, and did so with a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth. And it was I suppose a kind of signal and perhaps the most important thing I ever did because it was such a massive failure. It was, there were all sorts of reasons for its failure in the, when it came out, because actually it's like any other sketch show, some of it's good, some of it's bad. And it didn't have a

laugh track, which was quite extreme at the time, I didn't want it to have a laugh track and I just, we just made the sketches. And as I say they were all political, they were all about things like droit du seigneur, they were about dieting. My last word on dieting was a diet called auto-cannibalism, which actually is the Atkins diet only you eat yourself, parts of yourself. And I remember getting reviews like, "This is very man-hating, this is very..." And I thought, "Well I love men, I'm just writing about what it's like here for me. That's all I'm doing, and if that's how it's striking you that's really bizarre." So it was a very violent experience, and what is interesting and important about it is that after that I didn't write sketch comedy any more. I never wrote another monologue, I never wrote another sketch, and I think that's quite tragic actually. Because I really wanted to be Lily Tomlin, I really wanted to be Jane Wagner and write another version of you know *The Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, which is more or less what I was trying to do I suppose. And it was, oh it was a terrible experience, and I tell the story with great purpose, because I think if you can't fail like that you can't do this job.

**JB:** No and there's an issue of resilience, there's a kind of trope isn't there that's to do with the combination of screenwriting as a negotiation with an industrial scale industry, and the resilience which is probably genetic that's required. Because we were talking about that. I'll come back to it because you've asked me to read a review, but I'm not going to do that yet, because I want to celebrate the series, and I think this is probably a moment to show the Victorian mouse sketch.

**ET:** Okay.

**JB:** Do you want to put that in any kind of context or do you want to just run it?

**ET:** This sketch is based on an Edith Wharton short story about a young woman who is, as it were, almost in an arranged marriage I suppose. The story is, she's coming back to her house and she's having a conversation with her mother. And Wharton is a wonderful,

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she's a wonderful writer for subterranean pain and struggle and rage, and she's brilliant like that. And it's about this woman basically saying to her mother, "You knew you were marrying me off to a brutal man. You knew what he was like, this guy, and you let me go and you didn't tell me what was going to happen, not anything about it. And it's about, I suppose, sexual ignorance that I felt was very much abroad at the time and that I feel is very much abroad now in a different way because of people's access to internet sex now. So anyway, that's the provenance as it were about it.

**JB:** Yeah, that's the provenance of it. Shall we show it?

**ET:** God I hope you laugh.

**JB:** Can we run the clip of Victorian mouse sketch, thank you?

**ET:** It's my mother and my sister and me, and the lady who sings at the end is my cousin Eleanor.

[Clip from *Thompson*]

[Applause]

Yep, it's a sketch about a willy.

**JB:** Sex and laughter.

**ET:** Sex and laughter, yes.

**JB:** Sex and laughter, really. Yeah.

**ET:** I'm so glad you laughed. You didn't laugh out of pity did you? Well I don't care, I'll take it. I used to have violent arguments about the nature of comedy with my peers at the time, and particularly with Ben Elton who was, "Em, you've got to have a joke. You've got to have a joke, got to have a punchline. You've got to have a punchline." And I said, "I don't think you do have to have a punchline, I think you need a punchline when you're a boy." Because men's jokes are essentially something that goes on and on, leading to an ejaculation at the end. Which I, I mean as soon as someone says, "I've got a

good one," I go, "Oh God no, Jesus Christ. I'm going to have to react at the end. I'm going to have to laugh at the end even if I don't find it funny." And women's comedy is more circular. There are little laughs here and there and then there's a big laugh and then there's another little laugh. So I think that our humorous, as it were, DNA, goes hand in hand with our sexual, with our orgasmic natures you know. That men's goes zip-ping...

**JB:** We could talk about this for a long time.

**ET:** And erm, [mockingly] yes I think really I didn't express that very well. But anyway, never mind.

**JB:** I'm going to, because I'm aware of time, I'm going to, we talked about, you've actually talked about the impact of the reviews. And I do want to, I want to move it on because I want to get to *Sense and Sensibility*, and I want to talk about how that came to you, and what you first did about suddenly being asked to adapt a classic like that.

**ET:** Okay, well it came to me because of that sketch, because they actually showed that series in America. I think it was on at three o'clock in the morning or something on some obscure channel, you know Iceland Today or something. But my great friend Lindsay Doran who produced *Dead Again*, which is a film I made with Ken Branagh all those years again, and Scott Frank who's one of your...

**JB:** Yeah, one of our alumni.

**ET:** She was watching it, and she thought "That's the woman I want to adapt a Jane Austen novel". Go figure. So she said, "Would you like to adapt *Sense and Sensibility*?" And I said, "Well I think I'd prefer to adapt *Persuasion*, but I mean I've never adapted anything, why would you, I don't know how." So she said, "Well would you be interested." And I said, "Sure, I mean I'll have a go. I will, I'll have a go." I'll, what'll I do? I'll go and ask Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who's a very good screenwriter what to do. And Ruth said, "Dramatise the whole book and

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then see which bits work, and then take everything else away and try and make those bits, then you have to write your bits."

**JB:** Yes because where do you begin and it ends?

**ET:** That's the trick of course because adaptation is both distillation and a kind of imaginative invention that you have to use to create your own skeleton. Because you can't put a whole novel onto the screen, it's not possible. So I was still married to Ken at that time, he was playing Coriolanus, and we were in a little cottage in Chichester. So I sat outside, it was a nice summer, and I wrote the first draft and I adapted the whole thing and it was about 600 pages long.

**JB:** Quite long.

**ET:** Very long, it's quite a long book.

**JB:** 120 pages being the norm, yes.

**ET:** Yes. And then I started to, because it's like I suppose a piece of sculpture. You know, that mound of paper, which is in there somewhere.

**JB:** Yes I love the fact that you've brought them.

**ET:** I've brought, these are all the drafts of *Sense and Sensibility*, and this I think is the first one. So this mound of paper is just the novel more or less, it's all written on the back of old scripts, everything in there is.

**JB:** And then you wrote it by hand first?

**ET:** Yes, I write everything by hand. There's a few drafts there that are all handwritten. There's 17 drafts.

**JB:** What I like about the box is that most people don't see that process. Most people, you know you say to them you've done 17 drafts and they go, "Oh yeah, really?" And it's all on your floppy disc or your hard drive. That's actually a physicalisation of it which I think is really good.

**ET:** Yeah, that's a lot of work. That's five years. And not all the time, I mean, and what's interesting is as well that because I act too, there's one draft in there that I wrote while we were shooting *Much Ado About Nothing*, where everything's very Tuscan. There's a lot of olive oil in that draft.

**JB:** A lot of sunshine suddenly, very sunny seas.

**ET:** Yeah, and it's just like, 'Elinor leaps out of the shower.' Anyway, Lindsay said, "I do understand why this is so sun-soaked, but you have to throw the entire draft away and go back to the one before and work on that." And that's what happens sometimes and you just have to bite your tongue and go, "Okay, alright."

**JB:** And Lindsay was your editor or not?

**ET:** Well, yes, more than my editor. I think all writers, all novelists, poets, everyone needs a good editor.

**JB:** To reflect them back to themselves and reflect the work back to you.

**ET:** Well also just to be really good at knowing what's good and what isn't. I read a lot of novels anyway, but I read a lot and I think, "Hmm, where's the editor?" Editing in film as you know is something that's very highly regarded, but the editing of the screenplay is somehow always put in our hands, and I couldn't write a decent screenplay without a really good editor. I don't think I could. I mean I have done, I've written screenplays without Lindsay.

**JB:** But I think the key thing, the key point that you're making which is very, very important for people to understand is that unless you're in conversation with someone in the development stage of a screenplay it's almost impossible to work through to the point of final draft, because it is a collaborative medium. You know you're not novel writing, and as you said, many novels could do with a lot more editing. Elinor, the character of Elinor, what was the thing about her that drew you to her and that you wanted to kind of draw out in the screenplay. What was it about the nature of her

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emotionally in the piece that you were looking to kind of find and bring to the surface?

**ET:** Well. It's an interesting book *Sense and Sensibility*, because it's her first as you know, and it's very arcane the language, harking back to the late 1700s rather than the early 1800s, and so it's complex. But she's very, very simple. I mean she's all about duty and honour really, I mean she is honour personified, and what was so interesting about finding Ang Lee as a director, because he wasn't famous then at all, was that he'd just written *Eat Drink Man Woman*, which is all in Chinese and had one line in it where an elder sister turns around to the younger sister and says, "What do you know of my heart?", which is exactly what Elinor says to Marianne. And that we'd both written the same line in two different countries, separated by what? Well clearly not very much. And there's this connection between notions of honour. One of my big questions all my life has been, what is the female hero? Where is she? What does she do? And actually if you read the 19th Century novelists they were all concerned with exactly the same question. Particularly George Eliot who wrote very beautifully about heroism in the introduction to *Middlemarch*, which is very well worth having a look at actually. And because, I don't know whether I agree with her, but she talks about female heroism as existing often in the, well the river, the ever-flowing river of human behaviour, the detail of human life as Austen wrote about the detail, the little ivory. All of that detail, and the acts of heroism were written into that flow.

**JB:** Stitched into it.

**ET:** Stitched into it. And there's a great deal to be said for that, but at the same time I still identify with Clint Eastwood, so it's not enough for me to know that all my little acts of heroism are going to count. I would also like to be the one to whom the other person is saying, "No don't go out and do that. Stay here at home with me. Don't go out there and do the brave thing." That drives me mad. It's always the woman saying to the man, "Don't go and be the hero, stay here." I want to go and be the hero.

**JB:** And in wanting to do that, and in wanting to mix it up, the Jane Austen Appreciation Society, appreciative, or not appreciative?

**ET:** Oh that's so funny. Well you know, if you go anywhere near any of those books they get overexcited.

**JB:** Because this is a problem with iconic stuff isn't it.

**ET:** Yes, and she's very protected. There hadn't been a film, Jane Austen movie, since Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson had rushed around in crinolines, Greer not Laurence. And I was on a plane on my way to LA and someone, probably from the Jane Austen Society, I don't know, but she was very keen to say hello and say, "Oh I hear you're adapting *Sense and Sensibility*. I can't wait, [adopts American accent] I can't wait to see what you've done with Anne and Lucy." And I said, "Oh, well I'm afraid I've had to cut Anne." And she literally turned on her heels and walked away. She just didn't even say, she didn't say anything, she just turned around and walked away. And I thought, oh, okay, we're gonna be up against it.

**JB:** Well a lesson in what's not said.

**ET:** Yes it was just she was so appalled.

**JB:** Elinor and Edward, it struck me when I was looking at it again, have an amazingly contemporaneous relationship. There's something about their wit that feels the opposite of antique. And the question for me was, when you're writing something where that kind of frisson of sexuality is there embedded in it somehow, are you writing that into the script or is that something that's inferred? Is the script the muse for the performer when you're finding those silences and that wit, or were you very aware of consciously wanting that in advance?

**ET:** Oh yes, very much so. I mean, the thing about Austen, I read all her letters, well the ones that Cassandra bloody well left us, she burnt an awful lot of her sister's correspondence. I want to kill her. And anyway, she was very funny and

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very sharp, sharp as a tac, and very interesting about money. And a lot of her stuff's very political as well, and she's very clear in the most wonderful way about really selfish people just staying selfish and getting what they want, and that's what they do. There's no comeuppance, you know there's no comeuppance for Lucy at all. She just is extremely selfish and carries on being selfish. And that's great, I love that realism. But she was funny, above all she was funny, and so the me the relationship between Edward and Elinor had to really lie in a very deep humour and humorous understanding of one another, as well as of course their shared sense of honour. Honour is thought of as a very masculine quality, the honour of men. To me the honour of women is equally powerful and mysterious.

**JB:** And I'm conscious listening to you is that all that you're talking about is the detail of negotiating with a classic novel and trying to bring yourself and your feelings that have been evolving through the sketch comedy and everything to that work. And what I'm also conscious of is that when you reach the point where a film is made your screenplay has to do many things, but one of the things it has to do is to have a structural integrity that can withstand navigating filmmaking. And we were talking about this and you gave an analogy which I really liked about tensile strength, because I think that's very key. Can you remember what you were saying about that kind of balloon thing which I think is really worth sharing?

**ET:** Yes, I think there's, the script, you know you can think of a film as having a loadstone and then you put, then you build the bridge around it and the bridge is the point you know. But the loadstone is there and if the stone is taken away, the keystone, forgive me, of an arch, if it's taken away the arch will fall. So without it it's impossible, and it has those angles to it. But there are so many, I've always thought of a great screenplay that holds water like a balloon, that you can bash it and twist it and change it, but it will always hold its water. So some water might move and it may change shape, but it will not burst. And what is so interesting and mysterious about great

screenplays is that you can make the whole thing, in a way I suppose making a film is like adapting a screenplay. You adapt the whole thing to film and then you take out the bits that work, you can't use the stuff that doesn't work, you have to cut it. And what's interesting about that is that you can shoot something that has been essential in the screenplay, essential, and then you film it, you've adapted it to film, and you watch it and you think, I've seen that, I can see it so I don't need to have that scene. Two examples: *Howard's End*, famous scene in the book where Margaret's talking about connection to her sister, 'only connect', that famous EM Forster phrase, and Jim Ivory said, "We've got to have it in, we've got to have it in." It was a difficult scene, there was no money, it was Merchant Ivory, we were always absolutely clawing our way through the schedule. And we shot it at great length, Jim was thrilled, and then I saw the movie and it wasn't there. I said, "You cut the 'only connect' scene," and he said, "We don't need it, we've watched you connecting all the way through the movie. If you say it, having just watched it for two hours it's completely redundant."

**JB:** And yet everybody up to the point of filming thought it was going to be an absolutely vital moment.

**ET:** Oh absolutely, vital.

**JB:** And that's very key isn't it, because you don't know until you know.

**ET:** Because you're describing what you've just seen. So this is the interesting thing, so I suppose adaptation is indeed a double process. You adapt a book to screenplay, and then the screenplay is adapted into a film.

**JB:** And it was Anthony Minghella who said editing is the final rewrite.

**ET:** Exactly so.

**JB:** Which of course is what you're doing in that moment. What you're doing is saying, "Actually, you know what, we don't need it."

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**ET:** Exactly. And then there's another mysterious thing that can happen which is by excising something, not only from a screenplay but also from a film, this works on both pieces of work, you can make the juxtaposition of the two remaining scenes so much more powerful by leaving something out. I mean I think screenplays are about ellipsis. The ellipsis. So write everything and then take out the stuff and take out as much as you can until you're right at the end just going, take that little bit out there. But it's still there somewhere, but what's left really pings out because of what you've taken away. I can't explain why that works, but it sometimes works in performance as well. So it seems to me that art of all kinds, performance art, it's all to do with energy. It's all about energy.

**JB:** And before we show a clip of *Sense and Sensibility*, let's talk about endings because there's another analogy that Jim Sheridan drew which is to do with energy, which I think is really profound and really helpful. And obviously the end of a film is what you meant to say, but you were working with Jim on *In the Name of the Father*, and he...

**ET:** He said, we were talking about screenplay writing and he said, the ending, some screenwriters it's the beginning, but he said "The ending should be like a magnet." And that when you start you think that in your head, immediately you get this pile of iron filings over here which are the scenes and the characters and the words which lift up, and then as you get closer to the magnet they get more and more magnetised, and then they start going faster and faster and faster and faster until boom, till the end, and they're all just phumph, and that's the feeling you get when you go to see a really great film at the end. It's all those iron filings have just gone whoosh, and you go out filled up with this incredible energy. It is, it's like the energy of electricity I think great art, and a great film needs to be that. So you're, you know that's your iron filings, and then the magnet's your ending, and the relationship between those two things, that seemed to me to me to be a very helpful tip.

**JB:** Incredibly useful, very powerful. And we'll show the *Sense and Sensibility* scene which is Elinor's last scene with Edward, and in terms of her character that magnetism is very important isn't it, because it's the...

**ET:** Absolutely, I mean Elinor's all about withholding, and writing should be about withholding. Write it all first and then see how much of it you can withhold, because that's the way you'll create your tension and this pull you know. Sometimes people take out too much and you go, what?

**JB:** You must never not be able to follow.

**ET:** So that's the trick of it. And Elinor is all about withholding. You don't know what she's feeling and she's constantly being accused by her sister of not having any feelings, and sometimes you think, oh God almighty I do wish you'd let something out. And then of course something happens that she cannot, there's nothing she can do about it even though it acts against everything she's been taught, everything that she is, but she can't help it.

**JB:** Shall we show it?

**ET:** Go on then. I've got a good story for afterwards actually.

**JB:** Yep, shall we show the *Sense and Sensibility* scene please, thank you.

[Clip from *Sense and Sensibility*]

[Applause]

**ET:** Okay, so two things about that that's interesting. That still makes me cry. And I'll tell you what it is, the speech that he makes, I wrote that quite early on in the process of writing the screenplay and I never changed it because every time I read it it made me cry. So if that happens to you don't change the speech because it probably works. And then the next thing was that we started to perform it and Hugh said, "Are you gonna do that?" And I said, "What?" And he said, "Are you going to cry all of the way through my fucking speech?" I said, "Yeah. Yeah, because it's funny.

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Yeah. I can't just sit there and listen to you can I. I've got to be, it's funny, it'll work. I promise you it'll work." He thought, "God, alright, alright I'll do it." And of course he did it beautifully.

**JB:** And he did it beautifully and it worked, it worked beautifully. Again, I'm very struck seeing it again, silence, the mother and the daughter walking out without a word, all those incredibly brilliant pregnant longueurs between them; written or performed? Were they there, were they in the script, they leave in silence, all that's there in your head?

**ET:** Erm, no.

**JB:** The stage directions are important to you I know.

**ET:** Stage directions are very important to me, very, very important to me as the reader of scripts. If they're witty and well-written then I know I'm in good hands. If they're cursory, or indeed banal, then I am very unwilling to read the bloody dialogue, because if you can't be bothered to make your screenplay the most beautiful thing you can make it, every single word...

**JB:** And I think that's so important because people forget, you talk about you know bleeding over every line in the knowledge that it's only a template, but I'm afraid that's just the reality of what you have to do to invest yourself in it.

**ET:** Indeed, absolutely, absolutely. That's fine, I mean goodness me, it's a thing, it has to be perfect, it has to be as perfect as it can be, and then you do hand it over to other people's art, and that's a privilege.

**JB:** Yes. And I want to, before we come onto *Nanny McPhee*, I just want to talk about you as an actor and the way that your tools as an actor fold into the experience of writing. You talk really movingly on the *Remains of the Day* DVD about that scene with Anthony Hopkins where Miss Kenton comes in and finds him reading a book, and you talk about not wanting the scene to have too much intention. To what extent do you bring your actors' antennae to writing, or are

the two different elements of the same journey?

**ET:** Well I think I bring them all the time. You saw me, those of you who were in the room, muttering to myself. So I will tend to act all the roles, I will try to write something that I think can't be said, that I can't be spoken. I mean I, when I'm learning, when you're learning, as an actor God almighty, when you're trying to learn bad writing forget it, you just can't learn bad writing, it's just impossible. But good writing, it just goes into your system, it's such a joy to learn good writing, and such a pain, it's awful learning bad writing. Sometimes you have to. We don't always get to do wonderful things and what we want to do, that's not our, that's not what this job is like, what life is like. But when it's good, my gosh you're so grateful.

**JB:** Talk about *Nanny McPhee* now. So how did that come about? How was that landed at your doorstep?

**ET:** Well that was me actually, it was one of those odd things when I was hoovering. I was hoovering in the room which has got most of the books in at my house, and I saw this little tiny volume, lifted it up, *Nurse Matilda* by Christianna Brand, and I sat down and looked at it and thought, "Oh I remember these books about that nanny who comes and she's terribly frightening and ugly, but by the end when they've learned all their lessons she's very pretty." And there's something about that I really don't like, but there's something about that that I think is very interesting and actually quite anarchic. "Ooh, I wonder if that would make a good film?" This was long before Gaia was born, it wasn't because I had children. Like my father I wasn't writing for children, I was writing for myself, and I found this little book and I sent it to Lindsay and said, "I think I'd like to write this as a film." And she said, "Brilliant idea." And she doesn't always say that. I mean I've sent her other things, she's sent me things and I've gone, "No, that's not really me." No, it's got to fit into you like that when you really want to write something, if you've got a choice. I mean I was lucky, I've been lucky because I can earn money acting as well, so I can earn a living doing a

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different thing, that's my point. So she said, "Yeah, go on, go for it." And I thought, "*Sense and Sensibility* was so hard, really hard book, oh arcane writing, Jane Austen, iconic novelist, this'll be so much easier." Nine years later, seven years in development. The first script of *Nanny McPhee* is not even remotely anything, I don't think there's anything that was in the first script of *Nanny McPhee* that was in the last script because it was so difficult to adapt. Because there's no story. So it was actually creating the story and then realising that you couldn't of course have 32 children because that would be impossible, and then you, oh it was hell adapting *Nanny McPhee*. It was hell. And it's interesting because there is a corollary, our first, the first assistant director on the movie who does everything said to me, he'd just done *Nine*, and he was nearly dead, and he said, "Oh you know what," it was halfway through the shooting of *Nanny McPhee* he said, "I was so relieved to come onto this movie and I just thought it's going to be so lovely. I read the script, I thought oh it's a beautiful simple story, this is going to be so lovely, we're going to be so happy." Halfway through the shoot he was just like, [comic exaggeration] "I can't go on. The donkey and the children and fucking Firth!" And he was absolutely at the end of his tether. And I thought there you go, you wanna make something really simple and beautiful that actually has profound depth and that isn't going to, is going to be good enough for after all the most precious audience that there is, it's you know, it makes your eyes water.

**JB:** And there's something else, which you've touched on. These Christianna Brand novels are more picaresque and more sequential than a structured novel like a *Sense and Sensibility*.

**ET:** Oh yeah, they have no structure at all.

**JB:** And the challenge for you, particularly with the microphone moment, particularly with *Nanny McPhee 2* was that you really only had the idea, but the idea is the key isn't it?

**ET:** Yes, well I was in the hotel, Hitler's favourite hotel, the Hotel Adlon, he loved it there. And doing the publicity for the first *Nanny*, and I thought, "Ooh, war, hmm. That would be good." That's where I got the idea in Berlin, and then I thought, "Ah, but I'm going to have to write the whole thing. There's nothing here."

**JB:** So it's adaptation in name only really.

**ET:** Yeah, I mean it's taking the character, it's taking that shape, which we're going to talk about aren't we because in fact I worked out some time ago that *Nanny McPhee* is a Western.

**JB:** Yeah, and before, can we just, because I'd like to show a photograph if I could. There's a little moment of inspiration pre-hoc. Could we show the photograph if it's there available to us.

[Photo projected on screen]

**ET:** Oh, it's me and Clint.

**JB:** So do you want to explain, this is like a pub quiz, do you want to explain why that's there, and where that was from, and why that's there and why it relates.

**ET:** Because Clint Eastwood's always been a great hero of mine. I love watching him and I grew up on Westerns. Talking of early influences, you guys will all have grown up on something different, well I suppose reality TV, err that's not so good. Anyway Westerns, well I don't know, Westerns; I watched *The Virginian*, *The High Chaparral*. Every night with my dad we'd watch Westerns of various kinds. *Alias Smith and Jones*, totally in love with Pete Duel, all of that. And so I think I was very much influenced by that form, and then I went and was doing all of the publicity for *Howard's End*. And I won an Oscar for that the same year as Clint won for *Unforgiven*, and so that was why we were on the same kind of publicity circuit and he was just divine to me and to my mum. And then the night we won I was sitting somewhere or other loud, and the Oscar was there, and Clint came down and put his Oscar next to mine and said, "Well, we did it." I said, "We." It was just

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so moving, it was so moving. It was like, I don't know, being anointed or something.

**JB:** I think I can relate to that. And him as a Western hero as a template for something in *Nanny McPhee* is really important, because it's about subversion as well I think.

**ET:** Yeah, it's about, the Western is the anarch basically, or the cowboy or whoever it is, you know it's a guy, which we just have to live with. And he comes into a situation where order has broken down, of some kind order has broken down, and he restores order using unorthodox methods and then must leave. The vital thing is that he must leave or be killed. He cannot stay. He can't become part of that world. What's important is he's the outsider.

**JB:** Like the Alan Ladd character in *Shane*.

**ET:** Like the Alan Ladd character in *Shane*. And when I was doing the thinking about *Nanny McPhee* I realised that actually I was placing the elements that I had learned as a young child of the Western, and I had domesticated them and put them into a nursery. Where after all we keep our most precious feelings and our most precious beings, and where, the place that we would defend with our lives were it to come to it. So of course it makes perfect sense that it's a Western, it's very odd though.

**JB:** Yeah, it does. And before we show a clip, which is actually a blend of the end of the 1953 classic *Shane* and *Nanny McPhee 1*, before we show that, just worth mentioning that it kind of comes back to *The Magic Roundabout*. There's that feeling when I watch, you know when I watch it, of you subverting the children's film genre with the Western film genre to allow *Nanny McPhee* to say it how it is and then to leave. And I do feel there's a provenance there which brings that back.

**ET:** Yes, absolutely, and my dad's thing of writing for people, just write for people. And you know, children watch films again and again, and you don't want

the adults who are being forced to watch it with them to want to drown themselves or open a vein.

**JB:** Yeah, that's always good not to do that if you can avoid it. Erm, shall we if we can show this BAFTA blend of the end of *Shane* and *Nanny McPhee 1*.

**ET:** I can't wait.

**JB:** We haven't seen this have we?

**ET:** No.

**JB:** Let's do it.

[Montage of clips from *Shane* and *Nanny McPhee*]

[Applause]

**ET:** You missed a trick there you know whoever edited that, you see editing, is because you've got a lot of children going, "Nanny McPhee, Nanny McPhee, we want you, we want you." Anyway.

**JB:** Darling I'll give them the note. Before I open it up to the floor I just, we've touched on you as an actor and we've talked a bit about editing. I think it's appropriate to end by talking a bit about mystery, you know the chimerical nature of this strange relationship between screenwriting, performing in that triangle of camera-director-actor, because it isn't something that you can just, there is no science to it.

**ET:** No, well that's what's exciting about it. There's a wonderful quote which might be a good thing to end on, where, it's a choreographer actually, and she was called Agnes de Mille, and she said, "Living is a form of not being sure. Not knowing what next or how. The artist never entirely knows, we guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark." Good, huh? that's it.

[Applause]

**JB:** Let's open it up to the floor. Now have we got any roving mics or are we boom mic-ing this?

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**ET:** Just shout and then I'll hear it and then I'll repeat it, with different inflection, to make you look really, really stupid. No I'm kidding. It's always possible.

**JB:** So could we go kind of old school and go hands up if you have a question for Emma. Let's start over here. And try shouting, see how it goes.

**ET:** Oh there's a roving mic.

**JB:** Oh there's a roving mic coming, yep.

**Question:** Hello. So that mic actually works?

**ET:** It works, it works.

**Q:** I'm a playwright, I've been working as a playwright for quite a few years and I'm trying to get my first screenplay made. And do you have any advice, first sort of the differences in style, and secondly just how do you get a screenplay made, how do you go about you know sort of approaching production companies? And second question, can I invite you to my new play next month?

**ET:** Okay, as to getting something made your guess is as good as mine. It's not, again there is no science to that either. You have to, God, I don't know. I mean Jeremy, help me out here, you also are a screenwriter.

**JB:** I think there isn't a, you know you're absolutely right there isn't a science, and honestly we have to go back to resilience, we really do, and persistence, and a necessary solipsism to an extent I think. You've just got to be stubbornly sure of yourself.

**ET:** Yes you would have to go, you would have to send it to people, and you'd have to keep sending it to people, or then you have to turn up, or you have to find a slightly more imaginative way of doing it. And you have to be sure, also, if you can, that it's good.

**JB:** Yeah, I think that's the elephant in the room. I think that the issue of talent which...

**ET:** It might not be any good is my point, and I think it's very important to recognise that because sometimes what we write isn't very good, and sometimes what I write isn't very good. And I do think it's worth remembering that.

**JB:** And also forgiving yourself when it doesn't always work, because you know we come back to this trajectory of failure. Because you know, someone would think, "Oh well, every script you've written gets made." I mean can we disabuse people of that for a start.

**ET:** No, no. Oh God no. Most of the screenplays I've written have not been made.

**JB:** It's very important.

**ET:** And the ones that haven't been made I've worked very, very hard on, believed in and loved, and thought they were good, but they haven't been made. Or you know I've handed them in and then somebody years later has made it with a different script and said, "Oh yeah, we just left yours." So I've often left completely on the scrapheap without anyone even telling me. So I don't get very well treated as a writer either. So that's comforting isn't it really?

**JB:** Good, on that comforting note shall we have another hand. I'm gonna go, I will come back to you, I'm going to go to the very back of the room because I always think people at the back of the room don't get enough mic time.

**ET:** They don't, it's true.

**JB:** And this is probably why because it's gonna take us some minutes.

**ET:** Start shouting.

**JB:** Yes, start shouting. Don't shout, wait for the mic. When I said shout I meant don't shout.

**Q:** Okay, let me just ask that if you want to write a strong female character, where is the line where you just have to realise that oh my God it has to be a man. So how much masculine elements

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can you put into a character that it still stays a female? That it still stays a strong female character?

**JB:** Male/female nexus this.

**ET:** Erm, when a person talks, dialogue, great dialogue, you often won't know whether it's a man or a woman. You shouldn't know, think oh because of what that person's just said I know it's a woman, unless they're saying, "Oh, I'm pregnant." So I don't quite know what you mean, and that worries me slightly because you're making men and women into sort of silos who always talk in a particular way and always have. And this is something I think you should have a think about because you don't want to do that. Men and women, I mean we started this discussion talking about the science of the brain, and the fact is that our brains are not appreciably different. They start to express themselves differently as education slowly beats the imagination out of us. And then nurture, the nurturing of the male and the female in all sorts of ways starts to twist us into impossible and sometimes deeply painful and inappropriate shapes. So I would look at that if I were you. That's the story, your question is the story.

[Applause]

**JB:** Great answer, great. Have we got a, can we trip down here because I, you had a question.

**Q:** I've got the mic over here actually.

**ET:** Oh, go on then.

**JB:** Okay, there's a lady here I promise to come back to. Yes. Fire away.

**ET:** Who's got the mic?

**JB:** Whoever's got the mic and spoke, speak.

**Q:** Hello.

**ET:** Oh hello. Yeah. Oh hello.

**JB:** Sorry, it's the weird thing about sound, it sends you everywhere. Right, go.

**Q:** Hi, Emma, when you're doing like the tenth rewrite, how do you actually, you know when you're doing rewrites, I have this problem, how do you know exactly when to say this is it, you know that's enough, I can't do any more. There has to be a time doesn't there when you do that?

**ET:** Well it's a very interesting question because of course it changes with each project actually, because you can have a situation where you're writing a project and suddenly it, it's, someone drops out, a director drops out and it, the production company say actually, we need it to be this actor, or it needs to be a man, and you have to rewrite the whole thing because it's a whole other story. I mean there's that, then there's your studio notes, which some of which can be very good and some of which can really not be very good at all and can be very irritating actually. I mean I have been known to break things and sob, but then you have to just buckle down and suck it up because if you do want to get it made sometimes you have to make compromises as well. But, you know sort of in, I think I kind of read it, a finished screenplay, finished, and I read it and I think that's as far as I can get it for now, that's what I think. And then I have to leave it to cook, and then I go back to it a month later and I think, oh God, and then I edit. And I'm a fierce editor, I edit and edit and edit. I like editing. I like getting rid of things. So I think that you can only know up to a point, and then you have to leave it, and then you take it a little bit further. I mean I'm lucky because as I say I can earn a living in-between those drafts, so I can leave six months in-between drafts. I don't write a screenplay for seven years and do nothing else, I wouldn't be able to afford to do that. So I'll write a draft and then leave it for a few months sometimes and then go back to it. So that's very lucky because I think it's a pearlised thing. You know you start with this little piece of grit and each draft is a layer, and there's a nacreous quality to that layering, and sometimes when you're looking at the pearl at the end,

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hopefully it's a pearl, not a pig's ear, and you look and you can see coming through in the light, you can see the shadow or the light from a very very early draft, a feeling of an early draft. It's a very interesting layering process.

**JB:** And now this is key to something terribly important which sometimes is misunderstood, and that is that the hardest part of screenwriting is touch and feel. Tone, pace, touch and feel. And you have to use instinct and you have to trust, you have to apply all that, and the waiting and the cooking, and I think you, that is a learned process which requires exactly the same rigour as you were talking about earlier.

**ET:** Yeah, don't panic, and if you're really uncertain put it away in a drawer for a bit and let it be, because something will happen in your mind, and something will happen in the drawer.

**JB:** This lady here, you had your hand up earlier.

**Q:** Thank you. My daughter and I were discussing those who feel entitled and those who feel unentitled, and in doing so found that we shared the same role model, and so we've collaborated on this role model and come up with a script. Just curious, who's your role model?

**ET:** Oh, well, oh I was hoping you were going to say me. I'm terribly disappointed. I really had to control what I was going to do with my face then, because I was just going ready to go...

**Q:** Can I ask my question again?

**ET:** "Thank you so much. I'm so glad that I'm your role model and your daughter's role model," and then I had to do something completely different with my face. Oh. I think it's, I mean Jeremy said before you must be honest in these things, and I think it's important to be honest so there you go. My role model is my mother, because she is a great writer, she was my first editor, I would do stand-up for her. Best money I've always said that I've ever earned was doing stand-

up in Croydon when I was 25, on my 25th birthday I got 60 quid for supporting Ben Elton in Croydon. I did 40 minutes on my own with a microphone, and I had 20, no 60 quid in an envelope, it was fantastic, because I'd made that money, I'd conjured it up out of thin air. It was just me a microphone, it was just words coming out. And I would do those pieces for my mum in the kitchen and she would edit them for me. She's a great editor my mum, talking of editing, and she was editing me obviously long after my father had died because he would have been a very good editor. So I was very lucky in that both my parents could and can write.

**Q:** You are in fact...

**ET:** [*Laughingly*] Don't do it, don't try and do it now.

**JB:** I'm gonna move it on. Old school hands up everyone. I will come back to you. I'm obsessed by the back of the room. Someone over there who looks young and handsome, over there. There we are. Speak.

**Q:** That was a mistake. Yeah, no, it's just mainly a question in terms of, as a screenwriter you talked about finding, having to remove scenes that you thought were important in the script, because obviously when you translated it into cinema you didn't have to have it. So in terms as a writer and as an actor, where do you find that balance in terms of understanding, oh yes, this is what we can interpret on to the screen, and then this is something that won't work on the screen and then we need to [incomprehensible] into the dialogue? Where do you find that?

**ET:** You can't know, that's the whole point. That's the whole point is you can't know. That's what's so interesting about it. There's a scene in *In the Name of the Father* where, which is about a miscarriage of justice, and Dan Day-Lewis who's one of our great, well probably the greatest actor, he had to play a scene where he finds out his father who has been wrongly imprisoned has died in prison of a heart attack, and he hasn't seen him. And Dan had this

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huge scene to play that was a big rigmarole because he had to break up his cell, smash the whole thing to pieces, just go nuts, which of course he did brilliantly. And Jim cut it, because the effect of going from telling him to a completely still man, post this big thing saying, "I understand," was so much more powerful. You cannot tell until you have filmed the thing that cutting it will make it better. Sorry.

**JB:** Wonderful. There's time for probably two or three if they're brief. We haven't been over here, so someone's hand is up at the back there.

**ET:** Oh there's nobody at the front now. Now I'm worried about the front.

**JB:** I promise to come to the front. Go.

**Q:** You know the kill your darlings process that one has to go to, you said you like editing, so where do you keep the box of drafts?

**ET:** That box?

**Q:** Yes that box.

**ET:** That box is in the attic along with the portrait of me, looking pretty fucking ropey I'll tell you. And you know the other things I've killed. No that's in the attic actually.

**Q:** Do you ever go back and read them?

**ET:** No. No actually I haven't looked at that for literally fifteen years, I haven't looked at it for years and years. It was just Jeremy saying, process, and I thought, oh, I think I've got a boxful of drafts of *Sense and Sensibility* in the attic, and low and behold I did, covered in dust, so I brought them down and he said, it's an interesting thing to have because I looked at it and I thought, oh yeah, you know all those handwritten drafts. I write by hand, I write the first three or four or five drafts by hand at least, and it's interesting because the first draft's very messy and then as I get the second draft I'm a little bit more neat, and the bits that I think are not going to change are very neat. And then I move onto the next one and it's a bit neater, or

there's bits of it that I've got a new bit and it's all very messy. And then only until I really can't be arsed to write it out again because I think it's going to be the same, only then do I put it onto the computer. Because you see, if you keep rewriting by hand you will rewrite it as you write automatically, you're not copying. Whereas if it's there on the screen and it's all neat and it looks nice you can be fooled into thinking that it's good. Your hand and your heart work together to inform you that something is ready.

**JB:** Take note.

**ET:** That's, I hadn't thought of that.

**JB:** Down here there was someone very patiently waiting there on the second row. Yep.

**Q:** Hi, I have a question in general, when you go into writing something do you go in knowing how you want your story to end from start to finish, or then do you just write from a point or an idea and then just see how it flows until you get to the ending? And then also during your drafts, have you ever written something with a complete idea of how you want it to end and then at your 11th draft completely changed your story?

**ET:** Well, if it's an adaptation you're likely to end with the ending of the book, although not necessarily, not necessarily. Again, as I've said, it's peculiar. And in the same way as you might begin a script and you can write five scenes in and then suddenly discover that actually you need to drop the first four scenes because they're not, that's happened to me a lot. That's what I mean about just write, because you can dive in later, but you've got to create the shape, you've got to have the stuff, you've just got to have the stuff there to work with because that's what it is. It's your material, you've got to create your material first, do the knitting, spin the wool. It's spinning the wool. It doesn't matter whether it's bad because you can make it better later, but if you've got nothing to work on then it's neither bad nor good, it's just nothing. So just write, it doesn't matter what you write. It

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does not matter, just sit at that desk and write. And then the next day you may come down and think, "Oh, that sentence is quite good actually, the rest of it isn't, but that's okay, I got that sentence. I can work with that." That's the rule, just drawing the chair up to the writing desk and writing, that's all, and it's the only thing that works for me. I can wander about and Hoover and that's important too because you shouldn't sit for too long, practically speaking you shouldn't sit for too long, it's not good for you. You know I mean just get up from time to time and wander about, go for a walk or you know, whatever it is you need to do, make a sandwich. But those little moments of reprieve are also good.

**JB:** Incredibly important.

**ET:** Does that answer your question?

**Q:** Yes, thank you.

**ET:** I mean endings are important but sometimes you're not quite sure.

**JB:** I'm going to just find one more question and then I want to end on a note of celebration. Very, very quickly and we've got one minute so super-quick. Down on the front row here. Front row. Be as lapidary as you can.

**Q:** Okay. How often do you write a character with an actor in mind? And how does that relationship work for you?

**ET:** I often write with an actor in mind and then I never get them, so I tend to give in in the end and just write it. But I sometimes do. I mean I wrote, yeah I better not say, oh dear. I do sometimes write with an actor in mind and sometimes it's very helpful because, for instance Hugh Grant, I knew that he would be able to do lines like, "What is swabbing?" You know, that he would be able to do that, it's important that you know. My father was a director and he said 90 percent of the work of directing is in casting. So actually, you could probably do quite a lot of your work in your writing by casting. And it could be a dead actor, but you know that someone's going to be able to do it. I mean not always, I don't always have

people in mind, truly, but I think sometimes it's very helpful.

**JB:** Okay, we've just got time for this because I think it's rather fun to end on this. So a final clip, Em, it's from Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*.

**ET:** Yeah, Billy Wilder is my hero and well, okay, first thing, William Wyler, also great, said this, which I think is worth passing on. "If you wanna make a great film you need, your screenplay needs to be all good scenes, no bad scenes, and one great scene." And Billy Wilder understood that above all else, and his movies what's so extraordinary is that even, I mean in *Sense and Sensibility* there are appendices for all the little moments when people come into a room, are talking behind them, you don't hear the stuff. You listen to the beginnings of things like *Some Like it Hot*, the way in which the tiny little bit parts, their dialogue is diamond, diamond sharp. And the ending of the film that you're going to see is so beautiful because the actual ending of the screenplay is he goes, Jack Lemmon has said all the way around that's the way the cookie crumbles, or cookie-wise, that's the way biscuit-wise, whatever it is. But he says, *The End*, screenplay-wise. That's what I mean by someone who really knows how to write. You know you're in good hands, you know this person is a great artist, and that's what you have to give to it. Anyway, this movie, *The Apartment*, is probably one of the best screenplays ever written.

**ET:** Ever written. Well written in conjunction with Izzy Diamond, his co-writer, and I want to just very, very quickly preface you so you can appreciate how beautiful it is. Bud Baxter played by Jack Lemmon is an office drudge and he has been lending out the apartment to his bosses in the hope of getting a promotion. And low and behold he falls in love with Miss Kubelik who is a lift operator and the lover of the managing director. And after a lot of beautifully written plot twists he despairs of ever loving her and is about to pack up and leave the apartment, at which moment this happens. Could we go to the clip of *The Apartment*, thanks.

**BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture: Emma Thompson  
20 September 2014 at BFI Southbank**

[Clip from *The Apartment*]

[Applause]

**JB:** *[Over applause]* Ladies and gentlemen, Emma Thompson.