

BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series, in association with The JJ Charitable Trust

Richard Curtis

30 September 2013 at BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

Richard Curtis: I got a slide that I thought I might put up straight away, because it was a song that I was listening to while I was working out what to say. It's a song by an Irish pop singer called Paul Brady, called Nobody Knows.

He says 'Nobody knows why Elvis threw it all away/ nobody knows what Jack Ruby had to hide/ nobody knows why some of us get broken hearts/ and some of us find a world that's clean and bright/ you can be packed up and ready/ knowing exactly where to go/ how come you missed the connection/ no use in asking/ the answer is nobody knows'.

That's just to say that nobody knows the truth of what makes a good screenplay or a bad one, what leads to success. There are thousands of good screenplays, I'm sure, packed up and ready knowing exactly where to go. Or films that should have been wonderful and don't work out quite as they should have done.

So I'm just pleading ignorance before I start. Also, this is almost my first lecture, all the other lectures I've ever given have been to my children, and I'm still doing the washing up so I'm not exactly convinced of the efficacy of the lecture form.

And also I do want to say that everything that I want to say will only be partially true. Or, as it were, only true for me, which is a really important thing. Screenwriters on the whole don't talk to each other about what they do. For instance I always think it's a clever thing to leave myself notes for the next day, so I've never woken up and started writing with an empty page in front of me. There may be other people for whom the empty page is absolutely key. Without it they couldn't, perhaps, feel the challenge.

I write enormous amounts, I write 20, 30 pages of stuff a day and hope that some of it's good. There may be other people who do the exact opposite, who care about every word and don't put it down until they're sure it's right. So I seriously don't know what's right or wrong, all I can do is tell you what's true for me.

For the first bit of the evening, I've decided to use Jeremy Paxman as my inspiration, because I'm just going to ask myself the same question a few times and try and give a few different

answers. The question is 'why?', I'll be answering that, and then I think Edith [Bowman] and I have agreed that we might talk about 'how?' as it were, about the processes a little bit more, and then you can ask 'what' ever you like.

So, the first question that I've asked myself is 'why did I start writing films?'. The answer is because someone called Michael, an American, asked me to write a film. I'm going to tell you a little bit about that, because often the things that you don't do in life are the most important, and there are many things about this first experience which completely defined what followed in my life.

So I got a phone call from my agent saying 'he wants to see you tonight', and I thought of the idea for the film that I was going to try to sell him on the Northern Line. That was the first big mistake that I've never made again, which is that I always have lived with the idea of any film that I'm going to do for at least a year before I eventually start writing it.

Films can't be infatuations, they've got to be relationships. And I suppose this is my first observation, that I think the difference between having a good idea for a film and a finished film that you like is the same as seeing a pretty girl at a party and being there when the same girl has your third baby. It's an incredibly long journey, and a good idea is only the tiny little spark at the beginning of this immense process.

Anyway, I came up with the idea for Michael, it was about a father and a son who both found out on the same night that the girls they were with – the girlfriend and the wife – were having sex with other people. And so they both left their flat and their house and moved in together into a hotel and had to deal with their peculiar situations together.

It was called *Four Eyes and Fat Thighs*, and I think that's the only thing I got out of it because that's weirdly close to *Four Weddings & A Funeral*. Then I wrote a draft, I went out to LA and I wrote a second draft under the producer's eagle eye, in his guest room. And then he put me together with a director with whom I wrote a third draft, and then we

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handed it in, and we had what I think is quite a typical American meeting.

They loved the script. They really loved it, and I asked them did they have any reservations at all, because their smiles were so big. And then they said the dialogue wasn't great. It was too English and a bit too formal. I said 'alright', and then they said that the two leading characters were not good, because they were both weak, and you needed someone to be able to root for in the movie.

And then they said, obviously, 'the jokes are all very English so we'd have to think of jokes that would appeal more to an American sense of humour.' And then I remember saying to them 'That really only leaves the title', and they said 'We hate the title'. But the strange thing was they still said 'Can't wait to get the next draft'.

So I went home, got a self induced temperature of 103 and about a week later I flew home to England and Metro Goldwyn Mayer sued me in perpetuity, I never delivered the script. And that explains pretty well everything about what I have done since then.

First, never do a project that you haven't thought about beforehand. Second, be sure that you're working with people who actually like the work you do, which I think is hugely important. Choose the people you work with really carefully.

But most importantly (and this isn't a rule for everyone), I decided that I would never write a film about anything that I didn't really know about very personally.

I realised when I was writing the film I didn't know where Americans shopped, I didn't know what they'd watched on TV when they were kids, I didn't know anything about the structure of their schools. So I came straight home and I wrote a film called *Camden Town Boy*, which was eventually called *The Tall Guy*, about someone who lived in Camden Town, where I lived. About someone who had hayfever, which I had, and about someone whose job was to be a straight man to a comedian whose name in the script was Ron Anderson. My job was to be Rowan Atkinson's straight man, so I have always since then, basically, stuck to

what I think is true to my experience and emotionally right for me.

So that's why I started on a career of small, personal English films. It was absolutely key, and I think the other thing that was key in my development as a screenwriter was one sentence in William Goldman's fabulous book called *Adventures In the Screen Trade*, which I would recommend anyone who hasn't read it to read, where he said that most directors end up making films that vaguely remind them of a screenplay they once read. That sentence is the stake of fear through my heart, that's dominated everything I've done since then.

The next 'why?' is why most of the films I've written have got made. This makes me a very lucky screenwriter, and I would only share my particular analysis of that situation. Which is about partnerships and the people you choose to work with. Movies need a lot of people to get made, and I've been unbelievably lucky with the people I've worked with.

My advice to anyone is that you search for people for people to work with who really like what you do, and whose behaviour as far as you can tell, is going to be to your taste. And then you stick with them. My father's motto was 'you can't be happier than happy'. He always used to insist that no matter how ordinary the pleasures we were having that it wouldn't be better in Hawaii if we were perfectly happy in Folkestone.

And I'm not saying that Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner are Folkestone, but I did my first film with Tim and then after that Eric joined in, and I've always worked with them under the guidance of my excellent agent Anthony Jones, and throughout they've made a series of wise decisions that I approved of. They never behaved out of character with me, or how I would like my career to be handled.

So that's, for me an absolutely key thing in my career. And if anyone ever says 'How do I start? Where do I send my scripts to?' my first advice is to send them to producers or people where you really, really like their credits. And where you like the kind of things they've made before. Don't send them to the five most successful producers in the country, because they won't be to your taste and your stuff won't

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be to their taste. I do think that's crucially important.

And then I've worked with a very limited number of producers, two of the four are here tonight. And with them I've had such great relationships, and the big thing there is to get a producer who really likes and loves and wants to support your work. Duncan Kenworthy, my close friend, said that the job of the producer is to make sure that everyone is making the same film. And that has served me so well, just that feeling that we've all got the same priorities. It's something anyone who's worked on films knows: that sinking feeling when you're sitting in a room with someone who describes your film and it doesn't bear any resemblance to the film you actually want to make. And if that happens get out fast.

The next question I've asked myself is 'Why the films have generally turned out as I hoped they would'. This is quite a complicated and odd thing, and I didn't realise it was going to be the core of what I was going to say. But on the whole the films that I've worked on have actually turned out as I intended, and I don't know how replicable it is, and I don't know if my experience is very personal. But I would say, from my point of view, a huge amount of the challenge facing a screenwriter is about control. This is a very important, tricky area. But if you write small personal films like I do, and again I'm being personal, getting yourself heard throughout the process seems to me to be absolutely crucial. This is what I've expected of and got from my executive producers and producers. I'm not a boisterous, bruising, difficult person. I'm generally quite a friendly bloke. But it seems to me to be completely self evident that, as a writer, that's what you would be looking for.

So I chose Mel Smith to direct my first film, and I think we did pretty well as a group of inexperienced people trying to make the best film that we could.

When it came to *Four Weddings* I decided I was going to take this control thing even more seriously, and I remember asking Working Title for a list of 10 directors who they thought might be good for the film. And then Emma Freud and I took a month out and we watched films by all those 10 directors and none of them rang

a bell. We couldn't see anything in the work which felt like the film that we wanted to do.

This does add to the amount of time that you have to give to a project, but I think it also saves you a lot of time in the end. And then we set out on this bizarre quest of just watching everything, and I remember for three weeks we sat in the house and we watched about 100 things.

And finally, on day 17, we watched a TV film called *Ready When You Are, Mr McGill*, which Mike Newell had made. And suddenly we saw something there which felt like *Four Weddings*, which felt like it was realistic but also funny. A kind of humane, slightly exaggerated comic realism.

And then we went back and looked at Mike's other work, particularly at *Enchanted April*, and we could see the same thing again, and also a roughness about how it was shot. So he wasn't on our list, or anyone else's list but we went and asked Mike to do it and that was, I'm sure, the best decision pretty well of my career.

And then, with Mike, and this is again where it was extraordinary producing, we made a deal that we – me and Duncan – would be involved in every part of the process of making the film. Which meant being there when it was being cast, being there every day when it was shot, and being there a lot of the time when it was being edited.

That was the deal, and Mike knew it was an odd deal but brilliantly, in his position of seniority and experience, he agreed to it. And he stuck with it with enormous grace throughout the entire process. He only tried to stab me once, with a plastic knife, and that was very near the end of the edit.

So in the end I think it worked out, and I think the films was definitely Mike's film and the film that he would always have made, but it did mean that there weren't any surprises and I was able to say what I felt at each point in the process, and that my feelings about the film and every moment of the film were at least there to be heard.

Very similar with Roger Michell on *Notting Hill*, again sometimes very tough, particularly in a

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long, tricky edit getting the movie down from over three hours to two hours. But again I was able to make sure that what I heard in my head, and what I meant, was represented throughout.

Sometimes I've let this slip in other projects that I have been involved in. If you just make one tiny bit of miscasting, then tiny mistakes lead to big problems. The house that it's set in is a bit bigger than you'd imagined it, if the music is jazz where you thought it was meant to be pop music, very soon you're making exactly the opposite film to the one that you were intending to make in the first place.

I feel as though if you've written something with care and love – and every screenwriter has bled over every page – you should probably try and be there when it's made, and when it's cut and when it's cast.

And so, strangely for me, in the end I decided simply in order to stay alive that I would take to directing myself. Which obviously comes with pluses and minuses. I am probably the worst director that I've worked with, but at least I know what I want and how it should be and that it will be accurate. I think it is interesting in my line of work to look at the comedies that have been directed by the people who wrote them, because it is an interesting list. Woody Allen, Charlie Chaplin, Billy Wilder, Judd Apatow, James L. Brooks, Bill Forsyth, the Pythons, Blake Edwards, the Zucker Brothers, Mel Brooks, the Coen Brothers – I looked at a list of the 10 top comedies as voted for in Time Out and I think eight out of the 10 of them are directed by the people who wrote them.

There's obviously an issue about not having contrary voices and the danger of not having the skill and the wisdom of an experienced director. But my experience in the films that I've done so far is that if you have the right producer, and certainly if you have Emma Freud telling you that most of what you do is wrong, I think that it is possible to give yourself the checks and balances if you direct yourself.

I'm sure that there are lots of excellent, lifelong writer-director relationships. For instance David Yates who made my film, *The Girl In The Café*, made – and I wasn't there much – a much more beautiful film, and a surprising film to me

and a better film than I could possibly have made.

But I do feel that you should, as a writer if you can, try to be there when it's done because you don't want to waste your life making, or having other people make, the wrong films.

And now the final bit, which is the most surprising bit to me of all. It may seem odd to you, but I only started to think about it four days ago. The final question is 'Why I have actually written the films that I've written at all'. I suddenly thought, 'why have I written this bunch of films instead of another bunch of films?'

When I thought of first writing movies these were my favourite 10 films: *The Godfather*, *The Godfather Part II*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Emmanuelle*, *Emmanuelle 2*, *White Christmas*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Animal House* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

It never even occurred to me that I could write anything like any of those films. In the same way that often you end up marrying someone who's not the slightest bit like you.

But there was another bunch of films that, for some reason or other, I felt I could identify with and could do something like. The films that I liked and thought I maybe could be like were: *Diner*, the wonderful cycling movie *Breaking Away*, *Gregory's Girl*, *Local Hero* and particularly *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*. These were the films that I was thinking of when I wrote *Four Weddings and A Funeral*, which I didn't know was a romantic comedy.

I thought I was working in a different genre, a sort of semi-autobiographical movie where love was a useful structure. I'm not even sure I knew there was a form which was a romantic comedy, and indeed I think it would be better to talk about romantic comedies as 'funny films about love,' rather than having them locked in the romantic comedy genre. And the strange thing to me is I wrote my first film when I was 30, and the key things I've written have been on the same subjects. They've nearly all been about love and they've been about friendship, and they've been about family. Thinking about tonight I've been as puzzled as some of the

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people who are very critical of my films, why I would bother doing it again and again and again.

I've tried to think about this. Why have I not gone down a lot of other routes? I've taken a bit of consolation from thinking about visual artists. I'm not comparing myself with these, but I don't know if you know Chagall – there are lots of cities and lots of cafeterias and lots of soup cans, but every time Chagall sat down he thought 'ooh, I know, I'll make everything a bit blue, and put some flowers in it and on the whole people will be jumping over houses'.

It's the same thing with Lichtenstein and Lowry. They must have been able to see there were other ways of going about things, but for some reason or other a sort of magical strange thing happens when you put brush to paper and pen to paper, which is the thing that you do and there's probably not much you can do about that.

I'm very interested in the issue of the massive injustice of the world we live in, why it's even conceivable that people are dying of malnutrition and malaria now and I've given half my life to that and written two films about it. I love pop music profoundly, and I wrote a film about that, and I've put a lot of pop into films.

And so I've just been thinking, that the reason I've written all these similar films is because they must be about the things that I feel most deeply in my own life.

So I was raised in a family that was full of love. That was the big thing in my youth, family love. Then at seven I met a girl called Tracy Thompson on a bus. She was wearing a white shirt and a red leather skirt, and that was all I thought about for two years. I remember creeping into my Mum's bedroom, and stealing a ring from her jewellery cabinet and giving it to Tracy, who threw it out of the window into the Swedish snow.

Then I fell in love with Julie Andrews. I remember being on the QE2 and finding out she was there, and stalking her for three days, and then hating my Mum because my Mum actually talked to Julie while she was having her hair done. I never even saw her.

And then at 20 I fell in love with a girl who, quite rightly, then decided to go out with somebody else. That was the biggest thing that had happened to me in my life, and it took me five years to recover from it. So that issue of romantic, hopeful love was huge. Then, for the next five years, all the joy in my life really was my friends and if you look at *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill*, they're mainly an effort just to try and be as funny as I think my friends were most evenings when they chatted.

And then I met Emma [Freud], and her and the children are absolutely the central thing and the major joy in my life, and the thing that most interests me. I remember when we got nominated for an Oscar [for *Four Weddings*] and we went to the Governor's Ball, and at the end Em said 'What did you think of it?' and we both agreed it had been lovely, but we would have preferred dinner at Piers's or at home. Because that was more to our taste and more what was going on in our hearts.

So my family, the new family, the old family are central to my life and of course life starts to get harsh at the age I'm entering now. Three out of the six members of my family have died over the last five years. All the big emotions and all the big things that I've felt have been in this area. In the area of romantic love, family love, friendship.

And not, as it were, in the area of serial killers, superheroes, people who died 300 years ago, secrets, scandals, corruption, action, sporting victories, gangsters, things from outer space, all of these things that are of huge interest to other people and take up their time have clearly not been the thing which inspired me.

I've just written a lot of times about love, friends and family because it would seem that if you really write what you care about you have no choice. That must be why I've rarely written about anything else, and maybe that takes me back to the beginning. After all the mistakes I made on the first film, I've found I do best when I write what is true to me and what I understand. I hope that I have listened, in more ways than one, to my own instincts and my own heart.

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At least for the moment that's my explanation
why I've ended up writing the things that I
have.

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