

## Ron Howard: A Life in Pictures

02 July 2013 at the Princess Anne Theatre, BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly

**Dave Calhoun:** A very good evening everybody, welcome to BAFTA, and welcome to this A Life In Pictures event to celebrate the career – so far – of one of America's most diverse, successful and popular directors, Ron Howard. I'm Dave Calhoun, I'm your host for this evening.

Ron Howard's directing, producing and acting talents have established him firmly right at the top of the film industry, and his many varied and much-loved stories have won him many honours so far, including four BAFTA nominations and two Oscars. Soon we're going to welcome our very special guest to the stage and I'll introduce him further to you. First, I'd like us to see a montage of clips of just a few highlights of the films that Ron Howard has made over the past 30 or so years. So let's watch them now.

*Montage of clips*

**DC:** Ladies and gentlemen, Ron Howard.

**Ron Howard:** Thank you.

**DC:** Ron Howard, welcome to London, and welcome to BAFTA as well. I gave a very brief introduction at the beginning, but I'd like – if you'd allow me – to re-cap briefly, but not that briefly because you've had quite a long, varied career so far, over your life and career to remind ourselves, and the audience, of your work to date.

Ron Howard you were born into the world of entertainment. Your late mother Jean Speegle Howard was an actress, while your father Rance Howard has been an actor, writer and producer. You were born in Oklahoma in 1954 and you moved to Hollywood with your family when you were just four. You were acting on camera by the time you were five, and you were a stalwart on the popular sitcom *The Andy Griffith Show* through most of the 1960s.

As an adult you starred in George Lucas's *American Graffiti* in 1973; you played Richie Cunningham in the TV series *Happy Days* from 1974 to 1980....

**RH:** Oh boy, I'm getting tired.

**DC:** It was around that time that your directing career was beginning to take off – and that's the main focus of our conversation tonight. Your first feature was *Grand Theft Auto* in 1977, when you were just 23. Your next feature after that was *Night Shift* in 1982. Then came the charming romance *Splash* in 1984, and your

films have come thick and fast since then. Hard to define them, I'd say they're defined largely by their diversity, certainly by their desire to entertain and engage with audiences on a level that's intelligent, accessible and always entirely relevant to the stories and the characters in hand. Your films have combined popular appeal with smart, varied storytelling, moving at ease from comedy to historical drama to fantasy and beyond.

Those films include *Cocoon*, *Backdraft*, *Parenthood*, *Apollo 13*, *The Missing*, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Frost/Nixon*. We're going to see clips from six of those films tonight as we discuss Ron Howard's career. Twice you've been nominated for Best Director and Best Picture at the Academy Awards, winning both in 2002 for *A Beautiful Mind*.

You've also twice been nominated for Best Director and Best Film awards at the BAFTAs, both for *A Beautiful Mind* and for *Frost/Nixon*. Your latest film, which is coming out here in the UK in September, is *Rush* which is written – like *Frost/Nixon* was – by Peter Morgan, and it's the story of the intense rivalry between James Hunt and Niki Lauda, mainly focussing on the 1976 Grand Prix season. That will be our final clip tonight.

As I said before, we're mainly here to talk about your work as a director and producer, but I'd like to begin by talking about your acting career, because it stretched to almost two decades before you began to direct. As I said, your first acting credits are from when you are four and five years old, what are your earliest memories of being on film and TV sets at that age?

**RH:** Well, it was actually the first thing that I did, a movie shot in Vienna called *The Journey* about the Hungarian revolution. It starred Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr, Robert Morley was in it, it introduced Jason Robards Jr. So later, when we were doing *Parenthood*, I used to tease Jason that we got our start at the same time – at least in movies.

And that was sort of an accident. My dad grew up on a farm in Oklahoma, and had this dream of being a singing cowboy. He didn't want to be a farmer. In fact he and his dad butted, he was the oldest son, there was a lot of friction there, and finally at one point my grandfather – when my dad was about 17 – put his hand on my dad at a tense moment and said 'feller, you'd better find something you like and figure out how to do it, because you ain't never going to make a farmer'.

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And my dad said 'no, I'm never going to be a farmer'. He wanted to be a singing cowboy, like Roy Rogers. Fortunately for me no-one told him that he couldn't sing. He can't carry a tune to save his life. But he did have his gumption and gall, and he went to the University of Oklahoma, where they happened to have – for some reason – a really rich, significant theatre programme. A lot of people came out of that programme. He met my mother, Jean, there.

She had a lot of vision. I think she sort of infused him with this sense of possibility, bolstered his confidence, even though she kind of lost her excitement for the business; the personal rejection was ultimately a little hard for her to take, even though she was very talented. Later in life, when there was nothing at stake and the kids were raised, she went back to work and actually worked a lot as a character actress. It was very validating to her, but at that point she really threw her support behind my dad, and he worked, then he had to go into the Air Force.

He continued to work, came out, struggled but also directed a lot of theatre – and that's where I came in. Some of my earliest memories are of watching him direct plays during summer stock. And at a certain point when I was very young, three I guess, I started mimicking some of the dialogue. My dad had toured with Henry Fonda in *Mister Roberts*, so he was directing a version of *Mister Roberts* and I was picking up on some of that dialogue.

He thought that was kind of funny, and we developed this scene where he would play the Henry Fonda part and I would play the Ensign Pulver [part], Jack Lemmon did it in the movie. And we could do it. I remember it. He would do it for his friends, and they would just get a huge kick out of it, and I got a kick out of it too. And I actually remember that.

When that summer was over in New York he was making the rounds – which is what actors had to do in those days, they had to promote themselves. There was a casting call, and it was swarmed with kids. He couldn't get in but he left a note and it said 'Rance Howard stopped by, I couldn't get in' and, I don't know, just as a flyer, just to try to get the guy's attention or something he said 'by the way, I have a son who's a fine actor'.

He got a call back, and he said 'bring your son in'. My dad didn't really know what to make of that. We went in, we did this scene and they said 'that's pretty cute, can he do anything

else?' He said 'I don't really know, but we'll find out'. We went back and we learnt another scene, and they liked that, and they wanted to do a test. I remember this very vividly, my dad got a couple of friends in, one guy tied a can to a mop handle, so it was like a sound boom.

He hung it over my head and would shake it, while my dad was teaching me the lines and we were doing the scene. And he was giving me the greatest fundamental advice, he was saying – and this was to a three-year old – but he was saying 'don't pay attention to any of that, only look at my eyes and listen to what I'm saying, and then when it's time to do your line, do it. But listen to what I'm saying; it will make sense to you'.

I remember doing that screen test, and I liked it, and I got that role. I didn't know about this child-actor business, but my dad had a little part in it too, it was a chance to go to Vienna. He thought we'd put that money aside, that would probably be the only money they could offer me for college, and meanwhile we'd get to go to Europe, and we did. It was a remarkable experience, and when it was over we visited Paris and Venice and London. I loved it. So when he came back he said 'maybe it's not so bad for him,' and I kept going and, lo and behold, I wound up getting a lot of work.

**DC:** You started off very close to your father's work, and the flipside of that has been that you've kept your father very close to your work over the years. He's often appeared in your films, hasn't he?

**RH:** He has a line, my brother Clint has a line, but the lucky charm – the one who's actually been in all of it, even though she doesn't fancy herself an actress at all – is my wife Cheryl. We met in high school, and at a certain point fairly early on after the budgets got a little bit bigger, I realised that because we'd always been working on a shoestring or for free, she'd been in all of my movies whether she liked it or not. That was the only thing I became superstitious about. She humours me and shows up in all the movies.

**DC:** I mentioned at the beginning that you had those long stints in two TV series, *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Happy Days*. Do you think as we move on to talk about your work as a director – and we see a clip from *Splash*, that'll be the first clip that we see in a minute – do you think you learned a lot from being on those sets that you brought, certainly in the early days, to being a director?

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**RH:** Well undoubtedly. But there was another huge advantage, and that was that the creative culture on *The Andy Griffith Show* in particular, a little bit later with *Happy Days*, but mostly on *The Andy Griffith Show*, was this very collaborative environment. Andy Griffith was this very earthy [sic] comedian-actor, and it was called *The Andy Griffith Show*, he wasn't officially a producer but he was very much an important figure in the show creatively.

After we would read through a script the cast was always invited to hang around and discuss the script. And I was too. So from the very, very beginning, I mean at six years old, I was witnessing this creative problem-solving and that's what was really remarkable. I remember one very eventful moment for me, it was the second episode of the second season, so I had probably just turned seven, and we were rehearsing a scene where I was supposed to walk into the sheriff's office – this whole thing took place in a little town called Mayberry, and he [Griffith] was the sheriff – and I was supposed to say something.

So I came in in the rehearsal, and sort of paused, and I kind of raised my hand. The director said 'what is it Ronny?' and I said 'well I don't think a kid would say it that way'. He said 'well how do you think the kid would say it?' and I pitched him my idea and he said 'good, why don't you say it that way? Let's start again'.

I sort-of remember this, I stood there grinning, and Andy Griffith said 'what are you grinning at young 'un?' which is the way he really talked. I said 'well that's the first suggestion of mine that you've accepted', because I'd tried some other things when I was six, and they didn't fly. I said 'that's the first suggestion of mine you've ever accepted,' and he said 'well it was the first one that was any damn good, now let's rehearse the scene'. But I was a part of this thing, and that was a gift. It was a very collaborative environment, the writing was good, the quality of the show sustained itself because of that, it was a unique voice, and that was very significant to me.

And so, yes, I've always built upon the fact that I understand that process. Actors feel safe with me but as a film director it didn't take me long, once I was under way, to realise that I had to go far beyond that and begin to trust the cinema of a thing. And to recognise there were ways to support what an actor was doing that had nothing to do with close-ups, it had everything to do with the environment and

other things. I'm still kind of learning that lesson, but my default is always get to the performance, get to the heart of that, build around it.

**DC:** We're going to leap forward now, we're going to leap forward to see a clip from *Splash*, which you made in 1984, your third feature film for the cinema. I'm sure it doesn't need much of an introduction, I'm sure most people have seen it, but it stars Tom Hanks and Daryl Hannah, with Tom Hanks as a man who falls in love with a mermaid played by Daryl Hannah. It's a witty, oddball romance, a fairytale essentially, set in the modern world and full of humour too. So let's see a clip from *Splash*.

*Clip from Splash*

**DC:** An incredibly sweet film, and a very funny scene there.

**RH:** Tom's voice has gotten a lot lower, hasn't it? Thank you. Also written by [Lowell] Ganz and [Babaloo] Mandel, the same guys who wrote *Night Shift*, but Lowell Ganz was also one of the primary writers and producers on *Happy Days* which is how I met him. This was my second project with Brian Grazer. *Night Shift* was his original idea, so was *Splash*, and it was really pre-Imagine Films but this was the film that really cemented our partnership, where the collaboration was really born, because it was so difficult to get this movie made.

**DC:** You and Brian Grazer, as you said, this is the second film that he produced of yours, and you set up Imagine Entertainment just a couple of years later, formally. You've had a professional, creative relationship now for almost 30 years, how do you explain a relationship that's been so fruitful and so long-lasting?

**RH:** I think we have different skillsets on the one hand, but on the other hand, even though we sort of value movies for different reasons - I think more in terms of story values, he's a little more interested in the zeitgeist, pop culture, that sort of thing, I'm always a little more rooted in what's going on emotionally, what does it represent thematically - but when we ultimately see eye-to-eye on the same project it's just time and time again it's proved that's been something worthy of throwing our resources behind. And he's really, really multi-dimensional in that he actually wrote the story to *Splash*, he was nominated for that. He's a creative guy, but he's also fantastic at just sort of navigating the Hollywood system.

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He understands it in a very intuitive way, and he's a really gifted businessman. He can empathise with executives; he understands what the agents are looking for and what they need to compel them to support a project. He understands what the artists need as well, and he knows a good idea when he hears it.

So he's been a great collaborator and of course our friendship was built running the gauntlet of getting these first two movies made together, and yet even though we've had the company for a long time it still feels new, it still feels like a kind of a struggle. It's always defining and re-defining itself, and I think that's sort of the good news, it keeps us engaged, it keeps us feeling like the fire's burning.

**DC:** And talking of long-lasting collaborations, it was the first time you worked with Tom Hanks, the first of four times, you went to work together on *Apollo 13* and the two Dan Brown films *The Da Vinci Code* and then *Angels & Demons*. Each time you've come back to work together has it been the same, has your relationship developed as both of you have changed and matured, him as an actor and you as a director?

**RH:** He has changed very, very little outside of the voice. The one thing that I really noticed, and I began to see it in his work, and I really noticed it when I began directing him in *Apollo 13*, was that something had evolved. He was always very compelling in every scene, when you had the stuff in the editing room. Whenever he had something to do or say he was alive, he was interesting. But there was another thing that happened; he began to be even more interesting when he was listening.

I think that's when he really became a leading man. It was before *Apollo 13*, but somehow he began to be able to express as much through a moment, through a reaction, as he did when he was on and had the line scripted and given to him. He was always strong improvisationally, and when we got through *Splash* and we were in the editing I remember always feeling – because he was anxious, it was his first movie, I was mindful of that – I almost reined him in a little more than I should have.

I realised that a lot of his ad libs and a lot of his ideas, in fact, were resonating and making the final cut. I remember at the time thinking 'when I get to work with Tom again I'm going to give him much more free rein'. It was a while until we worked together again, he was so well established with *Apollo 13*, but still at that point when I cast him initially it was just before

*Philadelphia* was coming out and *Forrest Gump* had not come out, so he hadn't won the Oscars and so-forth. And I had friends of mine, serious showbusiness friends, saying 'Apollo 13? Tom Hanks? It's a true story, right?' I said yeah. 'Are you doing a comedy version or some kind of Monty Python spin on this or something?' I said 'no, no, no, he's going to play the astronaut'. They were sceptical a little bit until they saw it.

**DC:** But *Philadelphia* had changed that by the time *Apollo 13* [came out].

**RH:** Yeah.

**DC:** We'll talk more about *Apollo 13* later on, I'd like us to move on to see our second clip from *Willow*, which you made in 1988, largely here in the UK. Also a collaboration with George Lucas, which we'll go on to talk about as well. To introduce *Willow* very briefly, it's a fantasy film about a character called Willow – played by Warwick Davis – who has to protect a sacred baby from the designs of an evil Queen – to really boil it down to the essence. Warwick Davis is also joined on this quest by a warrior, played by Val Kilmer, as well.

*Clip from Willow*

**DC:** There was certainly an element of fantasy to *Splash* in terms of the mermaid, but it was very much rooted in the real world. With *Willow* you had to create an entirely new world, and you were working with the cutting-edge of special effects as well. Did you feel with *Willow* that you were leaving behind the more comic tone of some of your earlier films? That you were making a leap forward in terms of the sort of films you were making?

**RH:** It certainly was a leap, and it sort of felt like graduate school or something, for me. Doctoral work, working for George, working on something that was really absolutely new territory. ILM had done the visual effects work on *Cocoon*, and I had really re-connected with George there, he didn't work on the film but I was spending a lot of time there in northern California, and I'd kept up with George. But it was really there that I sort of re-connected, and this was a story that he'd always dreamed of doing.

When we were working on the screenplay with Bob Dolman at the Lucas Valley ranch, the Skywalker ranch, one day Joseph Campbell and his wife were visiting. Joseph Campbell sat down at dinner, and we joined them, and he said 'what are you working on?' and we

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wound up telling him the whole story of *Willow*, and he started telling us the origins of all the myths that we were representing. It was a great night.

That particular shot [in the clip] was designed by Dennis Muren, one of the real godfathers of digital technology in movies. I think there was a shot in [Young] *Sherlock Holmes* that involved digital technology, but this was sort of the first of the morphing shots. We had this as a scripted transformation, but we expected him to do it more like *An American Werewolf in London*, you know, a series of cuts, dissolves, and there's still a little bit of that in this. But I didn't even understand what he was talking about, but the word 'computers' was involved.

He said 'let me just run some tests,' and clearly it was a really great innovation, but I learned so much about working on that kind of a canvas. But I also learned another thing to be honest, which is this was George's story, it was really George's vision, I was trying to facilitate that. He was certainly inviting me to bring everything I had to offer to the project, in fact he's the first one that officially gave me final cut. So he gave me a lot of freedom, but I felt a tremendous responsibility [because] he was financing the movie himself.

And when it was over I was very proud of it, I still am, it's got an enduring place in people's hearts. That gratifies me no end, but I also felt like I think that's the last time that I'm going to take on somebody else's story. I think I'm going to fall in love with it myself, and do it. And for the most part I've stayed with that. Maybe not a thousand per cent... it's not that I didn't enjoy it, but I think I felt a kind of a pressure and too often I was thinking 'I wonder at the end of the day what George is looking for here?'

As opposed to the other thing which is be collaborative, be open, explore, engage, take advantage of the talented people around you, but make it very clear that the buck is going to stop with you and you're going to finally decide, based on intuitively what you believe is right for this story. So there was a little lesson in that as well.

**DC:** I'd like to ask you on the back of this about your relationship generally with writers. You did write the first couple of films yourself, did you decide early on that you didn't want to have that role of being the writer as well, that your role was better in terms of developing stories, working with writers, giving them feedback?

**RH:** To be honest I think I wised up. I think I'm good with story, I think I discovered that intuitively, I think I have a sense of character and the big ideas, themes, motivations, structure I think I'm even good with. I think that's been an evolving thing that I've come to understand. But I'm not a good writer, at least I wasn't then and I haven't done much writing since. I may try again, who knows, some of this may have rubbed off.

But I love the collaboration with these world-class minds. It's fascinating. I can contribute, I don't just have to hand over the reins, it's an honest exchange, an honest conversation, but the difference between somebody who can take an idea that structurally works, that thematically makes sense, propels the narrative – all of those things – and sort of moves the story along, and somebody who can come up with those moments that surprise you, that enrich, and in ways that you had not expected, that dig deeper.

That's a gift, and I don't think that I necessarily have that, certainly not at my fingertips. I've been very, very lucky, fortunate, I've really enjoyed half a dozen or so collaborations that have elevated my work without a doubt, I owe a real debt to these folks.

**DC:** I mentioned at the beginning this was the first film you came to shoot in the UK, that you shot outside of the US....

**RH:** My son was born here...

**DC:** Really? During the making of *Willow*?

**RH:** Yeah.

**DC:** I was wondering what your memories were of only having shot films in the US before that, coming here – although you developed it with George Lucas in the US. What were your memories of the differences of working here than in the US?

**RH:** I really loved the hours, and I immediately saw not only the value and depth of the talent pool, the discipline of the stage-trained actors – which I'd witnessed a little bit in my own casting – but it was very, very prevalent. But there was also not only a range of talent but also a discipline that I really respected. And also crews, art department, honestly it's a great place to work. And it suits me. There's a degree of professionalism that I sort of relate to, and I found it really rewarding. It was fun.

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I'm a huge sports fan, and my only problem was that in those days, with no internet, you would completely lose track of the home team and you'd be picking up the scores 36 hours later. That was the only thing that got me down a little bit. Now, hey, it's no problem. I keep up with everything.

**DC:** We're going to go on to see a clip from *Apollo 13* next. [But] after *Willow* you made *Parenthood* and then made *Backdraft*, and I think if you put those three films together they show how open you've been to making films in different genres, with different tones, throughout your career. Is there any genre which you feel you've particularly avoided, because you really don't feel it's to your taste or you really don't feel that you can do it justice, despite people suggesting to you maybe you could make this....

**RH:** Horror. I like horror, when it's good. But whenever I've tried to create that moment that scares you I've never really pulled it off. I don't know what it is. And modern horror, I would be open to a good monster, but modern horror that's slasher – and I can enjoy those too, I love movies of all sorts – but to live there, I don't think I'd enjoy it.

In fact, jumping over a movie that we're not doing a clip of that I'm actually very proud of, is *Ransom* which was a thriller, it was about a kidnapping. Sadly, without a kidnapping actually happening, there'd been one perpetrated against my family. I kind of related to the potential horror of that. It hadn't happened, thank God, but it was something I'd sort of lived through in my mind as a result. So I was interested in this story between two families, a group that was going to perpetrate a crime and the victims, and the tension between. It was good acting opportunities.

But as I got into it, it was very interesting to me. I went in approaching it as a straight drama. I thought we were going to play these moments out frankly, honestly, and that'll be that. And I found that given the genre, the thriller genre, that element, that there had to be a degree of staging, camera timing [that] I had to be aware of. There had to be a bit of a manipulation in order to actually make the moments land the way they were supposed to, the way they felt right. And suddenly, I remember talking to Richard Price, who wrote that script, and I remember saying 'I'm working as hard and using artifice and staging to try to make the audience feel horrible. It's as tricky as doing a comedy – but at least there we're

going for a laugh, and a different kind of catharsis'.

I'm very proud of *Ransom*, I wouldn't steer clear of a movie of that tone again, but it was an interesting awakening for me. I don't feel that in the straight dramas where really it's about just exploring the situation and letting the honesty of it carry its own weight, even when it is shocking. So it was an interesting little learning experience.

The point is that I like all kinds of films, and because I grew up on two different television shows and – particularly then – television shows were about defining something and then more or less recreating it week after week, letting it evolve a little, shift a bit here and there, but mostly give the audience what they know they want. Offer that comfort, that assurance. Less so today in television, gratefully, but when I became a director and I realised I was going to have a sustainable career, one of the only sort of strategic ideas that I had was that I love the medium.

I want to explore it fully, even though it's easier for me to move in the direction of comedy, they trust me, there's more money in it probably, I don't want to do that. I'd rather risk trying to stretch and prove to the creative community and to audiences that I can be trusted working in different genres because I didn't want to be limited the way I had been as an actor. Once I did prove that, around the time of *Apollo 13*, then I stopped looking back. Now I can appreciate that something feels fresh, that it's something that I haven't really done before, but that's never the compelling reason that I make a choice now. Now, whatever the choice is, whatever the reason is, but it's not an exercise.

**DC:** We're now going to see a clip from *Apollo 13*, it's certainly not a horror but there are certainly terrifying moments in the film and it's also a film in which you set yourself huge challenges as well. For those who haven't seen it, or to remind you, it's the story of the troubled, nearly-doomed *Apollo 13* moon mission in April 1970, and Tom Hanks plays the flight commander Jim Lovell.

*Clip from Apollo 13*

**DC:** A fantastic clip, the film was nominated for nine Academy Awards, and was an enormous success with audiences. I imagine that one of the many, many challenges was packing in as much credible and accurate technical detail

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as possible while also making sure it's a clear, concise and thrilling storytelling.

**RH:** Well Hanks was a real stickler on this, loved NASA and my mantra, the thing I scrawled on the front of my script at a certain point when I began to learn more and more about the details of the story, the mission, what it meant emotionally to those in Mission Control – much of that wasn't in the initial script really, in a detailed way. I literally wrote 'just show it,' and as much as any movie I've ever done it was really about trying to recreate. Of course we had to collapse and condense, but this reminds me of a couple of things.

The blending of what we did in the zero-G aeroplane is here, everything in the tunnel. What we did is we did master shots and wide shots. I didn't want to do wire work, we experimented with it, it was very awkward. Wire removal digitally didn't exist then, so you had to hide the wires and I didn't have faith that we could do that number of shots and really hide all those wires. I thought we'd give the illusion away.

So we would up using this zero-G aeroplane that does parabolas in order to recreate weightlessness and do scientific testing and training of astronauts. Steven Spielberg was the one that told me about it. He said they used to practice EVAs by opening the door and getting out, 'maybe you could lock your set down and shoot in zero G'. I began to explore this idea, and everybody thought we were crazy, and NASA wasn't so interested in co-operating with us at first. There was some retired Russian plane that would do it, that seemed a little sketchy to us, we weren't sure we were going to be able to get the insurance for that.

Eventually Jim Lovell went to NASA and gained the agreement that we had to go and do a test flight. We had to do three days of training to be certified as basic air force trainees or something. We had to go into hyperbaric chambers, we had to take a written test, we had to a physical, we had to do a lot of things. And it was fascinating. And then we had to go up and do the test and prove that we could cut it. And we did, and we wound up going through it, we bolted our set down, and any time they were full figure that was shot at zero G. We had about 17 seconds worth of weightlessness.

Twenty-two seconds total, but there was about 17 seconds where we were stable, and in each mission we could do about 40 parabolas, so

you could get about 40 takes. We organised it on the land with storyboards, I would walk them through, we had a mock-up of the set. There was very little time to really make adjustments up there, so we'd go up with usually a list of ten. I think only one time we were able to get all ten shots during that time, but we would do the best we could. And things like going through that tunnel, any time when they were switching places, any of that full-figure stuff, that was all done in zero G.

Then we went on a stage and we did things like put them on these things called belly pans where they'd kind of be on a small crane, weighted, so that they were weightless, and the pan came up under their clothing. We would frame them like this, and we'd float them and then we would turn the set around on chains so that you would be disorientated, so it looked like they were looking up but really they were on the side of a belly pan being moved around.

Or they could sit in one, and because they'd been weightless they understood the physics of the action and reaction, so they could act it in a very, very realistic way. And it all worked. Later Spielberg said to me 'you know you're crazy, I never thought you'd really try and do that'.

**DC:** How many of those missions did you have to fly?

**RH:** I think we did 13 days of it. We took a little cocktail called Scopodex, which is half scopolamine and half Dexedrine. Scopolamine evens out your stomach, but wants to put you to sleep, and the Dexedrine keeps you working. One time we were getting ready to go, and we took our Scopodex – or at least I did – we were all planned out, and then there was some engine failure, and we couldn't go.

Everybody was laughing their heads off at me, because I was on the stuff and when you're up there, with the adrenaline, you really don't feel anything, you don't feel any buzz, but apparently I was running around [hyperactively] saying 'okay, so we can't but you can bring a camera over here, we have the set, we'll use the mock up, it's okay, you can light it – Tom come on!'. They were all just looking like 'somebody just hit this guy with a hammer, please'.

The other thing I was reminded of, another assist that we got, was Digital Domain did the special effects. It was almost all model work, one of the last big model jobs. The only digital

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work on that film was the ice and some of the debris floating around in space. But as a kind of a little deal, Jim Cameron was a partner in that company at that time, and I said 'this is great, I'd love to get half a day with Jim'. I only knew him just a little bit in passing, but he came in for more than that, a day, and went over all of our storyboards of our exteriors.

I remember saying 'I don't want these pass-bys to be the standard thing,' and we started talking about it, and together came up with the idea of trying to shoot them more like Spielberg's *Duel*, like it was a truck or a train that you were shooting. So you'd be vibrating and you'd press in and you'd move out, or you'd counter it as it goes by. I noticed one of those shots in there that we treated that way. I came out of that dialogue with Jim, he was really supportive and helpful.

**DC:** This was 25 years after the event, obviously an event that was still very much in the popular memory, in the popular consciousness for a lot of people. Are the considerations of storytelling any different when you know that lots of people will know the outcome? Or does that in some way free you?

**RH:** Well, what I discovered was that if you create enough emotional context, that creates the tension. If the details of it are in and of themselves threatening, they may know who lives and who dies, but they don't know how they managed it. And they don't know what it did to them emotionally, and what price they might have paid along the way. That becomes as tense and suspenseful as anything else.

And I think, look, we're all sort of trained – most of us – if you stop the projector at a certain point halfway through the movie, or a third of the way through the movie, and said 'okay, what are the possible outcomes?' you probably could name them. 'What do you think's going to happen?', you probably have a pretty good sense of which of the three or four possible outcomes is likely to be the one that the director's chosen.

A good story captivates you in a way that you stop taking the grand overview, and you like within it. The other little lesson that I learned, John Sayles came in and did an uncredited but very important rewrite. We were talking about the structure, and I felt like – when I did my read through – that it felt flat for much of it, even after the crisis.

We analysed it, and thought about it, and started talking about *The African Queen* which

he said they used as a model for *Piranha*, which was a Roger Corman movie that they did. And he started talking about that, Joe Dante had directed that and John Sayles wrote it, and we adopted this. And that was 'one crisis at a time'. Initially the script kept flying these ideas at us, and instead I learned a very important idea: build sequences. That's so simple but understand the crisis and then one at a time deal with the next one and the emotional baggage of it.

You always have the overall crisis in mind, but when you focus and give that a beginning, middle and an end it pulls you in, I think, in a more emotionally-focussed way. I think it does a better job of creating suspense. By the way, I've kind of decided that whatever the genre, whether it's for kids or grown-ups, comedy or drama, I think that all movies are supposed to be suspense movies. You're always supposed to be wondering what's going to happen next, and you're supposed to care enough to worry about it a little bit. So that was a lesson that I've been able to carry with me in the films since then.

**DC:** Time's flying, there's loads more I could ask you about *Apollo 13*, but we're going to see the next clip which is from *A Beautiful Mind*...

**RH:** By the way, did you see my brother Clint in there?

**DC:** You pointed him out, on the controls there. Are any of your family in *A Beautiful Mind*?

**RH:** My dad got cut out – that's a tough phone call. It wasn't his fault, he was perfectly good, he's in the long-form television version.

**DC:** I'm sure he respected your independence.

**RH:** Yes he did.

**DC:** *A Beautiful Mind*, another true story, another historical drama, the true story of the Princeton graduate and MIT professor and Nobel Laureate in economics, John Nash. A brilliant mathematician, and also a paranoid schizophrenic, played in the film by Russell Crowe.

*Clip from A Beautiful Mind*

**DC:** That's a scene early on in the film when John Nash is still at Princeton. The film won four Oscars, it won Best Picture, Best Director, it also won Best Actress and Best Adapted Screenplay as well. It was nominated for four more. I'd like to take the opportunity here to talk about your



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collaborations with the writer of the film, Akiva Goldsman. This was the first time you worked with Akiva Goldsman – you went on to work [with him] on *Cinderella Man* and the two Dan Brown adaptations. I believe that you agreed and decided that you wanted to do this film after reading the first draft of Akiva's script, based on a book by Sylvia Nasar.

**RH:** Brian Grazer, sort of fascinated by the workings of the mind, very curious about it, began five, six years prior to this with an ambition – I shared it, maybe not quite with his focus – to try to do something. We developed a comedy-drama, in fact Ganz and Mandel wrote one on another subject, but dealing with mental illness. A little more *Silver Linings Playbook*, in a way.

We then got involved in another story, it was a true story, but sadly shifted and became very tragic when he went off his meds, and actually killed a loved one. The true story suddenly took such a dark turn that we thought it was not something that we would want to make. This story took root. Brian began working with Akiva Goldsman, also Karen Kehela Sherwood, a long-time development person at Imagine, and Akiva, a very gifted writer, a brilliant guy, but both of his parents were psychiatrists.

He, one day, looked at the book – this is not a very literal adaptation of the book at all, it utilises elements of Nash's life, yes, but mostly what it does is offer insight into the illness. He had written, years before, a horror film in which the character was revealed to be schizophrenic, and one hero and one villain were fantasy characters in this person's mind. It never worked, he wasn't able to get it made, but suddenly he had the eureka idea to apply that to this movie. It changed everything. It went from an awkward draft into something very dynamic.

I still wasn't involved in this, but at that point a lot of directors were beginning to circle it, it was a movie that the studio was supportive of and – this is the great thing about being involved in a company and a partnership – I had the opportunity to read it in really a brief window. Brian said 'don't dilly-dally Ron, if you don't mind'. I decided very quickly to get involved and make it my own, and it was a fantastic challenge. We learned a lot. Thing like this scene [from the clip] began to evolve as we began to learn more and more about what the math was.

I had a couple of good influences. I was doing a lot of research, and I was interviewing

mathematicians, who kind of like the astronauts, were not really able to express much of what they were going through. Not terribly articulate about it, hard to put a thing that abstract into words.

But there was one guy, a guy named Simon Shapell [?], who was almost retired, he was working part time at NYU. Remarkable guy. He was much more poetic about it all. He talked about the difference between an elegant computation and an inelegant one. He was very expressive. One of the things that he said – as it related to John Nash – was 'let's assume for a moment that at any given time theoretical mathematicians are among the elite thinkers of their generation. There are a lot of fields that require our profound intellect, but let's just say they're in that group'.

He said 'I feel like they're pushing at the outer edges of what's known, so let's imagine that there's a battle line, there's a front line, there's light and then there's dark. I think they're pushing the light out into the darkness'. He said 'I think there are people on the front line doing that, and what they learn they don't really care about. They don't care about application, they just want to understand it, prove that it exists, but they don't care about application. They throw it over their shoulder to the next step back of profound thinkers. Those people do care about application, they take it, they make it work. Sometimes they make it into weapons, sometimes they make it into medicine, whatever they make it into they use it. We need them to advance civilisation and what's known'.

He said 'and then there's a third type. Let's think of this person as a paratrooper. They have the courage to hurtle into the darkness and drag their way back toward the light and give us whatever it is they've found out there'. He said 'I think that was Nash'. That became really an important way for me to look at Nash, to look at him as this kind of paratrooper. It was significant.

The other little thing was I was having a difficult time understanding the creative moment, the language of it. I sort of figured out music and writing is a little bit like the symbols that they would use, it was just language for them. Then I read about [Nikola] Tesla. Tesla used to have a problem, and it really frustrated the people who worked for him more than him, but he would lay in a kind of half-dream state and he could actually see the plans for an invention come together and either work or not work. If it

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didn't work he'd re-imagine a fix, and it would then work.

And once he did that he didn't want to write it down, because he'd already done it. In his own mind it was finished, and his own people would be frustrated and try to get him to do the work. So that influenced a couple of places where visually I was able to be in Nash's mind and sort of apply that Tesla visualisation.

**DC:** We're going to have to leap forward to see a clip from a film from 2008 now, also featuring a very complicated man of a different sort, *Frost/Nixon*. This came after, for you, *The Da Vinci Code* which was an adaptation of a hugely popular Dan Brown novel. This is Peter Morgan's adaptation of his own stage play – which I believe you saw here in London first. And it details the TV interviews between disgraced ex-president Richard Nixon and the British TV interviewer David Frost.

*Clip from Frost/Nixon*

**DC:** It was a longer clip than the others we've seen but I think it does brilliant justice to the performances, to Peter Morgan's writing and also to your direction there as well.

**RH:** Thanks, I can't take much credit to be honest. That was a great play; the writing is stunning. It [the phone call in the clip] never happened, of course.

**DC:** But it's a classic Peter Morgan moment, real life characters, general scenario...

**RH:** Nixon was known for those kinds of calls, and David Frost told Peter and I – but Peter long before I was involved – that Nixon had definitely tried to game him, charm him, agitate. That was something that he was doing. It's a remarkable scene. It was really a fantastic day of shooting. Salvatore Totino, the cinematographer, did a great job with that movie and the lighting is stunning.

I chose to shoot that scene on two different sets simultaneously, side-by-side on stages. I built the sets on these little stages. We weren't at a mainstream studio – it was a tighter budgeted film – we were off in Culver City. I had two cameras with Michael [Sheen] and two cameras with Frank [Langella]. Because they were long takes, I didn't want either actor to get the other actor feeding him off camera lines, I wanted everybody's energy to be full on.

And outside of a couple of pick ups, like maybe the shot back at Nixon through the window, things like that, I had four or five different camera positions and sizes set up for two cameras each, including some Steadicam moves and some things like that that were carefully designed and laid out, and it was really bravura stuff. It was stunning to watch this scene unfold, I always really cherish the memory.

**DC:** And as I said at the beginning, this was a project that you actively pursued yourself. You flew to London to see the play when you heard that it was up for grabs as a film.

**RH:** I had met Peter, I had talked to him about another project, something that I suggested that he didn't want to engage in, but I really liked his work and liked him. I read this play, thought it was something really exciting, unexpected. I wasn't a thousand percent sure that I understood how the adaptation would work, but I also realised that the reviews were great and it was really heating up. It was becoming a very hot property, but none of the directors who were bidding had really been in a position to see the play.

I turned to my wife Cheryl and I said 'you know, no-one else has seen it,' and she read my mind and said 'you wanna go to London?' and I said 'yeah, let's do it'. So we did. We got tickets, and [Michael] Grandage's production was so vivid and stunning and in its own right cinematic. The only thing that I felt was that I was sort of dying to get a camera up on stage and start moving around these guys.

And I also visualised that at a certain point the secondary characters, the ring men in a way would have their moment and then they would drift away. I was very, very interested in being able to see these characters from their perspective and understanding them a little more. That's really the only thing that I brought to the rewrite and to the adaptation, was to flesh those characters out, even giving them a green light to improvise which Peter was okay with and supportive of. And letting there be a kind of Altmanesque kind of vitality and chaos and spontaneity, in and around this scripted stuff.

And then the next thing that I agreed with Salvatore, the cinematographer, was that we wouldn't do rehearsals. We would talk through a general approach. I was very planned with this, but in a lot of other instances I just went for a general approach and let the scene begin and let the camera operator sort of wing it and

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kind of discover something. And then I would be back at the monitor ticking off moments that they were getting, that I thought in an interesting way. And I would have as a sort of a backstop my list of visual ideas, editorial notions that I thought we would need. Then I would go back with pick-ups and things like that and get it so that in the editing room we would have everything that I thought we needed.

But there were a lot of great, inspired, unexpected, improvised rack focuses and transitions, and it was very spontaneous for the actors. They'd already done the play for a year; I wanted it to be as fresh as it could possibly be for Frank and Michael.

**DC:** We're going to have to move on and see our final clip, which is from *Rush*, also scripted by Peter Morgan. Also, coincidentally, at the same time. It culminates in the 1976 Formula 1 Grand Prix season. Your latest film, the story of two racing drivers and very different men – James Hunt, played by Chris Hemsworth, and Niki Lauda, played by Daniel Brühl – competing against each other during that '76 season which is the climax of the film.

*Clip from Rush*

**DC:** Two great performances at the heart of this film, and also what we don't see there is you get us absolutely in the driving seat of those cars during those races. We hear the noise of the engines, incredibly loud, the grit on the road, the rain, the weather. It's a real visceral experience watching this film, which comes out in September. Obviously you already had an affinity with Peter Morgan's writing, having made *Frost/Nixon*, he'd already written a version of the script of this by the time it got into your hands, what attracted you to it?

**RH:** It really was this combination of things. First characters I was fascinated by. I did *Cinderella Man*, a sports story, and I enjoyed it. I love sports; don't know much about F-1 particularly. I didn't know much about boxing either and I couldn't begin to tell you how to go to the moon.

**DC:** It probably helps if you're not an immense fan.

**RH:** I think there's something about going in there and discovering, you know. I remember a quote that I read in 1969 or so, when [John] Schlesinger made *Midnight Cowboy*. Schlesinger, an Englishman, came to America and made one of the most keenly observed, most American kinds of movie you could

possibly imagine. It's very truthful. And when asked about it he said 'I think it helped that I really didn't know my way around. I didn't know much about the culture to be honest; I hadn't been there much, so I found everything fascinating. Things that others would take for granted and find mundane I, in fact, found fascinating and compelling and wanted to share what I was learning'.

That 'share what I was learning' stayed with me. I enjoy allowing my curiosity to lead me. F-1 was a pretty fascinating, dense, rich world. It was a chance to – cinematically I think, in those races, a little bit like I tried to do in the fights in *Cinderella Man* – work with the cinematographer. In that case it was Sal Totino again, in this case Anthony Dod Mantle, my first time to get to work with Anthony.

But to try to carry over the psychological baggage, the emotional factors from their lives that we were learning about through Peter's great scene work and the actors' work. And try to let that somehow inform the racing, so that each of the races would reflect the character in some way, as well as letting you understand the narrative of that season and that particular race. It was a real challenge; there was an element of risk involved because it turned out we were able to do so much more in camera car work than I'd ever guessed we'd be able to, and so I will admit that on the last day that we wrapped I was relieved.

I was talking to Anthony today and I was reminded of the fact that on that last day – I remember it quite well because we were shooting the final race which was a wet race, it was raining through the whole thing – we had cars – even our precision cars – hydroplaning and in one instance we'd moved a camera away from a position because we'd been told it might be a little risky, and lo and behold I'm so glad we moved it: that's exactly where the car spun out. We had no mishaps on the movie, no injuries, but a little bit like the movie *Backdraft* which dealt with so much fire, I was very, very glad when we wrapped.

But it was fascinating to make it, I'm really relieved by the kind of feedback I'm getting from people in the F-1 world who know, because like the NASA group, like the fire-fighters, I really respect the subject and I really wanted to honour that in addition to trying to capture these characters and create a movie that you certainly didn't have to be an F-1 fan to follow, enjoy and find something in it.

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**DC:** We're going to open up to the floor for questions in just a minute, so please do think of anything you'd like to ask Ron Howard; there'll be microphones going round. I know you've said of *Rush* that, of your editors that you've worked with for many years, they said it was one of the hardest of yours to assemble. I'm curious to know why.

**RH:** It's the demands of trying to relay a story within these races but not exhaust the audience with so much racing. And again, give it this psychological approach. Anthony gave us some really original, very impressionistic images to work with. When carefully placed they suddenly took on a psychological significance, or an emotional significance, which of course was always his hope.

But it wasn't wired into the story, you had to find places for those shots to live, you had to find the rhythm of so many races. So not only was it performance-rich and demanding in that regard, but the racing was intense. It required all their patience and creativity to keep pushing it; their creative endurance. And also, because it was the first movie that we've done digitally, there was more footage than ever to navigate.

There were little found bits everywhere, because sometimes the accidental pan off, or the rack focus was just the thing, given the style of the movie and the approach that I wanted to take, to help a transition work. So there was sort of what was planned, what obviously belonged, and then there was this other sort of very important connective tissue that had to be discovered.

**DC:** With *Rush*, in terms of it appealing beyond Formula 1 fans, you must have taken great comfort by the success of *Senna*.

**RH:** *Senna* worked inordinately well as a documentary, but that's a very different thing. Here's a movie that has to reach further. What meant a lot to me – and I've found this a lot with documentaries – there was a great Apollo 13 documentary; it's not like I could really borrow it particularly, but there's always something interesting in what a documentarian needs to do with sound, with music, editorial choices, that can be very informative and really inspiring. But mostly that Apollo 13 documentary told me how riveting the story could be – just the basic facts, rudimentarily told.

*Senna* provided the same thing, also the T2 documentary: fantastic, so compelling. But

another documentary that influenced both *Frost/Nixon* and *Rush* was *Gimme Shelter*. I felt like it was just such a great story and so keenly observed and captured, and yet had obviously had kind of an off the cuff sense of the world and the look.

It really informed *Rush* particularly, because I thought if we took more of a rock and roll approach to this it'll pull our attention to the other facets of Formula 1 that are interesting: the glamour, the environment, the media pressure. All those things, and it will sort of demand another level of detail and awareness. Plus it's just a style that would make it feel less like it was produced and staged and directed, and more like *Senna*, like you were discovering something.

**DC:** It does feel like that, it feels like a very immersive experience actually in the world of F-1. Let's open it up for questions. We haven't got a great deal of time I'm afraid, but I'm going to set up two or three.

**Question:** Hello Mr Howard, it's good to see you again, I'm American. Seven years ago we were at lunch and one of my colleagues asked you what was your favourite film that you'd made and why, and in your inimitable gracious, lovely style you said you'd have to think about it, and you'd get back to me. So it's been seven years and I was wondering if you could kindly answer which has been your favourite film, and why?

**RH:** My wife would say that was me being predictably passive-aggressive. I had an experience about 10 years ago where I was with a panel of students over a weekend and they asked me that question and I was honest about my answer, because I have my favourites and my least favourites. But when I gave my answer several of the people there agreed and several people were like mortally disappointed, they really liked that movie.

And it was a lesson to me, that once I've made the movie it's kind of none of my business, and I don't want to influence people's thinking. If they're getting something out of the movie then that's what I always hope for, right? So my opinion doesn't matter so much. Let me just say something else on that point. One time we were having a really bad time in our family, it was rough, teenage, four kids. An ugly, tough time.

Fortunately nothing dire and tragic, but just tense. I don't even remember the show, but a re-run of an American sitcom came on, and it was about as inane and banal as you could

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possibly imagine a show to be. But you know, it was absolutely dealing with our hot button issue. So for us, we became engrossed. We became an easy audience. Those cheap laughs worked on us, and you know what? It resonated.

And afterwards as a family we sat around and had a real healing conversation. And I just realised that, you know, I know what making a sitcom is like. They didn't think it was banal; they were trying. And they did, they succeeded. They succeeded for us that day, they entertained us and they added up to something. So I don't think you can ever know exactly how your story's going to land, so I'm going to keep my opinions more or less to myself if you don't mind.

**Question:** I'd like to ask you what your favourite movies are, but I'll make it a bit more interesting. You kind of grew up in the golden age of American cinema – Peckinpah, Cimino, Coppola, the 70s etc – and of course there's a great history of film before that. I'm just wondering if there are any particular directors that inspired you and that you wanted to emulate? And great movies that you think might have influenced you?

**RH:** Well thanks, the reality is that I continue to be influenced and inspired all the time, and I'm not just being diplomatic. I think as difficult as it is to get movies made – as easy as it is for studios to want to go for template manufactured product kind of movies that they can feel some confidence will work, sequels and so forth – really great things are happening all the time, and it remains very exciting.

The first movie that I really went to school on and studied was Mike Nichols' *The Graduate*, it landed with me, I was probably 13 at the time. Even though I'd been in the business really all my life, it was the first time I recognised the hand of the director making such a significant difference. And it's the first one that I really... you couldn't get DVDs. I had to keep going to the movies, and the prints got worse and worse, and the screenings got later and later, but I probably saw that movie 20 times in theatres between the ages of 14 and 18.

That was a very important movie to me. There was a great period there with *Bonnie and Clyde* and *In the Heat of the Night*, there were just some amazing movies, Zeffirelli's *Romeo & Juliet* meant a lot to me. Anyway, when I began studying my first instinct was to go to [John] Ford and [Frank] Capra. Ford had made *The Grapes of Wrath*, my family weren't

dustbowl immigrants but they were Okies and my father grew up in the Depression and that story really resonated with me.

Capra I related to sort of thematically and tonally, and he began to be somebody that I would set the alarm and get up at 3.45 in the morning to watch *Mr Smith Goes To Washington* a third time. But a few years later, because one of the producers of *Happy Days* was a guy named Tom Miller, who had been a dialogue coach on three movies for Billy Wilder, he and I talked movies all the time.

He loved movies, he was smart about movies, and he started conveying all these lessons that Billy Wilder had given him, that a movie is built on five memorable scenes and it's a director's job to understand, identify those scenes and build to them properly. Very, very important foundational ideas. If you have a problem in the third act it probably began in the first act. Go to the first act and look at your problem – those kinds of things.

So I began to study Wilder, and by then VHS came along and his diversity is something that I really actively emulated and will never achieve. Unbelievable, I just hold him among the elite storytellers ever in the history of the medium. But there's a lot to be admired out there. I hope that answers your question, that's what got me sort of fired up as a young guy.

**Question:** I recently re-watched *Night Shift* and *Gung Ho*, and as a former journalist I'm a big fan of *The Paper* as well, I was wondering if you could talk a bit about your collaborations with Michael Keaton and how you came to discover him, because you launched his film career with *Night Shift*?

**RH:** Michael Keaton is great, and I'm dying to work with Michael again. If I find the right role, he'll be my first call. I'd love to. Lowell Ganz – I mentioned, was one of the writers of *Splash* and had been one of the best and most significant contributors to *Happy Days* – had directed the pilot and some episodes of a show that Michael Keaton did with Jim Belushi [*Working Stiffs*]. We couldn't get Bill Murray to be in *Night Shift*, we couldn't get John Belushi to be in *Night Shift*, we couldn't get Chevy Chase [or] any of those mega comedy stars at that moment to be in *Night Shift*.

But the script was well liked, the studio was willing to make it if we could cast it. Lowell Ganz said if we ever got around to just casting this movie Michael Keaton would be great. I auditioned him and he just won the role, just

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like that. Henry Winkler came in, and the studio would greenlight the movie with Henry Winkler because they could get a five million dollar – this is '81 – pre-sale from CBS, because Henry was such a mega television star, and he hadn't really made his way in features.

I went to Henry, showed him the script, by then I had left the show as an actor and made that commitment. I'd been directing television movies that I was also producing. I went to Henry and I said 'you can play either role,' and he said 'I sort of feel like I've kind of been the guy with a million answers, I'd like to play the other guy Chuck'.

That left the door open to cast Michael Keaton. He came in and did a chemistry test with Henry, they rocked, and Michael was lightning in a bottle although the studio wanted to fire him for about a week. Brian and I, who were scared enough that we were going to get fired, were just courageous enough to defend him and wait the studio out and soon they began to see just how explosive and funny he was.

I loved making *The Paper*, which really was sort of the first movie – though maybe *Backdraft* to a degree – but *The Paper* even though it was fiction was the first movie where I really embedded myself with the journalists, hung out and wanted to make it as dense and sort of behaviourally honest as I possibly could in and around David Koepp's screenplay. I enjoyed that experience and I learned a hell of a lot, and it sort of helped me later with the fact-based movies like *Apollo 13* and the rest.

**DC:** Unfortunately we've run out of time so I'm going to have to bring things to a close, I know there's so much more we could talk about. It just remains for me to thank Ron Howard for his time, and his experiences and memories tonight, thank-you very, very much.

**RH:** It's a pleasure, thank-you.

APPLAUSE